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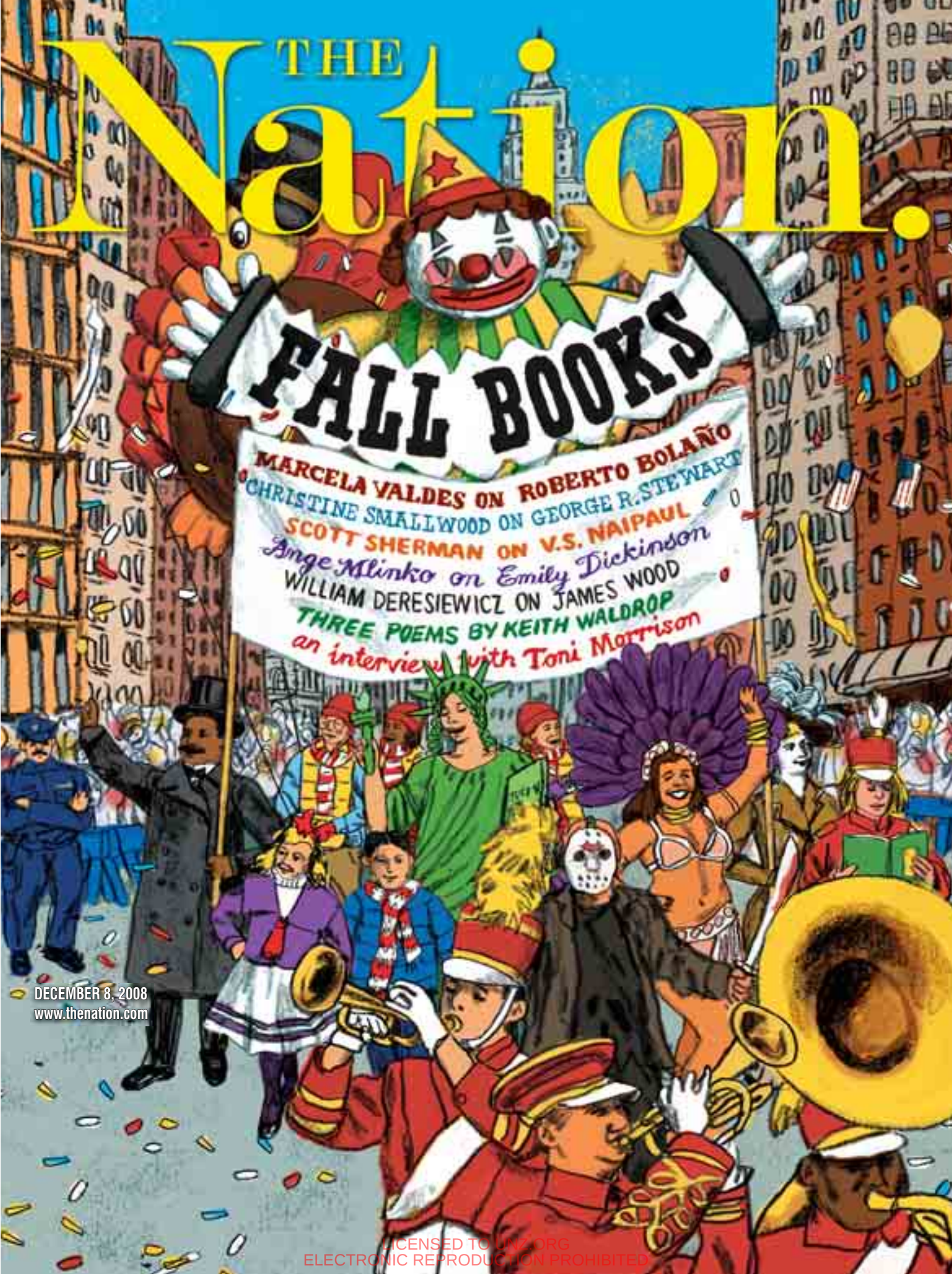
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CHRISTINE SMALLWOOD ON GEORGE R. STEWART
SCOTT SHERMAN ON V.S. NAIPAUL
Ange Mlinko on Emily Dickinson
WILLIAM DERESIEWICZ ON JAMES WOOD
THREE POEMS BY KEITH WALDROP
an interview with Toni Morrison

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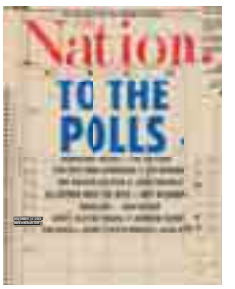
Letters



Working to Drop the Rock

New York City
Not to diminish the accomplishments of the Working Families Party ["Noted: Row E for Obama," Nov. 10], but real reform of New York's Rockefeller drug laws is still to come. Amendments adopted in 2004–05 left in place the harsh mandatory sentencing scheme that requires judges to lock up thousands of nonviolent offenders every year. The cost of this scheme—measured in wasted lives and wasted dollars—is astronomical. And that cost is borne overwhelmingly by African-Americans and Latinos. Justice and common sense require comprehensive reform. This will require Governor David Paterson's leadership. He can count on the support of the NYCLU's 48,000 members, who will mobilize statewide to overhaul the Rockefeller drug laws in 2009.
Robert A. Perry, Udi Ofer
New York Civil Liberties Union

Raucous Caucus: Pump Up the Volume!

Mt. Clemens, Mich.
What a relief to read John Nichols's "The Raucous Caucus" [Nov. 10]. As the last few months of the campaign came to an end (thank God), I was disappointed by how the Iraq War became an afterthought to the media and the public. I am still sickened by the unnecessary loss of life and the billions upon billions of taxpayers' dollars being spent to fund the invasion and occupation, money that would be put to much better use here, helping our citizens. I am also very disappointed by the lack of any real change after the midterm elections. I hope some more Democrats (Pelosi, Reid, Stabenow, Levin etc.) will follow the lead of the Raucous Caucus and get a backbone!
Pat Jones

November Surprise

High Point, N.C.
Bob Moser is sadly mistaken ["Obamalina," Nov. 10]. North Carolina has not and will not fall for Obama. I can assure you, as a lifelong resident grounded in reality, and politically astute regarding these matters, I found his attempt to suppress the conservative turnout as transparent as his flawed and arrogantly presumptuous logic. The Obama campaign and its willing accomplice, the drive-by, antiquated liberal media, have once again underestimated the underlying and prevailing political current in North Carolina, a middle-right state that is capable of making up its own mind. So please spare us the "exalted one," got that "tingly feeling running down my leg" garbage. We're not buying it! Socialism will be rejected by the electorate. Come election day, North Carolina will remain a red state, once again, showing that you guys have not a clue.
John Craven

Divided by the Devil

Greenwood, Ark.
Kudos to Alexander Cockburn for "Against Obama" [Nov. 10]! It is nice to read insightful dissent, even (and especially) when it challenges the majority opinion of your other writers. I commend *The Nation* for printing it! I always read "Beat the Devil" first!
Jonathan Keys

East Hampton, N.Y.
I mailed my absentee ballot with a boldly marked X in the Obama column. Then came your November 10 issue and, to me, the one-two punch. After a quick perusal of the contents, I turned first to the always cogent and truthful Alexander Cockburn. I have felt a similar growing dissatisfaction with many of the pronouncements (and Congressional votes) from Obama over the course of the campaign, but a vote for Obama has seemed the only possible vote for me. Still, war in Afghanistan seems a very daunting possibility.

Then I turned back to the Letters page and read the response from "The Obama

(continued on page 52)

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Time for a Bank Holiday

Henry Paulson's $700 billion plan to save the world is dead or dying, but the bailout was not killed by his arrogance or his grossly misleading claims about what the public's money would buy. The plan collapsed because it didn't work. The Treasury secretary has launched a PR offensive to revive his falling influence. Too late. The Democrats should be equally embarrassed. In September their leaders in Congress rushed to embrace the Paulson solution, no hard questions asked. They now claim they were duped.

COMMENT

Paulson's squad at Treasury pumped $250 billion into the largest banks, buying their stock at inflated prices on the assumption it would persuade investors to step forward with their capital too. Instead, savvy financial players realized Paulson was spitting into a high wind, trying to save a system with stout talk.

Here is the ugly, unofficial truth that neither Wall Street nor the government will acknowledge: the pinnacle of the US financial system is broke—with perhaps $2 trillion in rotten financial assets on the books. Nobody knows, exactly. The bankers won't say, and regulators won't ask, or at least don't dare tell the public. Official silence naturally feeds the conviction that banking's problems are far worse than we've been told. The Levy Economics Institute of Bard College puts it plainly: "It is probable that many and perhaps most financial institutions are insolvent today—with a black hole of negative net worth that would swallow Paulson's entire $700 billion in one gulp."

The scale of this disaster explains why the Treasury secretary had to abandon his original plan to buy up failed mortgages and other bad assets from the banks. If government paid the true value for these nearly worthless assets, the banks would have to write down huge losses or, as Levy economists put it, "announce to the world that they are insolvent." On the other hand, if Paulson pumps the purchase price high enough to protect the banks from losses, $700 billion "will buy only a tiny fraction of the 'troubled' assets."

Paulson was trapped by these circumstances (and his own mendacity). Each time he tried to change the script, market insiders became even more alarmed. Congress is trapped too. So is President-elect Obama. From the outset of the crisis, the essential fallacy shared by governing influentials has been a wishful assumption that quick interventions with tons of public money would somehow restore the system to "normal" without disturbing free-market principles. Replenished banks would start lending again and lead us to recovery. "Normal" is not going to happen. If the new president does not break free of the denial and act decisively, his administration will be dangerously compromised from the start.

Obama can begin by declaring a "bank holiday" like FDR's in 1933—an opportunity to put the hard facts on the table and assume temporary control of the entire financial system. Nationalizing the banks sounds more radical than it is, since banking law already empowers regulators to impose extraordinary controls and close supervision over troubled institutions. Facing facts will be painful, but it's better than continuing a costly charade. Paulson's approach, endorsed by many Democrats, was designed to preserve oversized Wall Street titans. In fact, Paulson and the Federal Reserve are making things worse by creating new members of the privileged club of "too big to fail." Public money is being used to finance bank takeovers that will become new behemoths.

A genuine solution means closing down the hopeless institutions and creating a more democratic system based on small to medium-sized banks, financial intermediaries that are less imperious and closer to the real economy of producers and consumers. The Levy institute sug-

Page 13: Alone among the ghosts

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NEWS & ANALYSIS

Katrina vanden Heuvel: Smart defense

Jane Hamsher: Zapping the volt

Kristina Rizga: You voted. Now what?

The Short of It: Sloveniafest

RADIO NATION

Nick Turse, Bob Dreyfuss, Frances Fox Piven

NATION POLL

Obama's secretary of state

RETIRE BUSH CONTEST

What's W.'s next job?

gests that some banks are "too big to save." If the president-elect seeks an opinion quite different from his circle of orthodox advisers, he could start with the institute's tartly incisive analysis "Time to Bail Out: Alternatives to the Bush-Paulson Plan," by Dimitri Papadimitriou and Randall Wray. Their perspective is Keynesian, not market worship. They argue (as *The Nation* and others have) that the bailout is proceeding backward. Instead of saving Wall Street first, government should devote its heavy firepower to reviving jobs, incomes and business enterprises. The banks will not get well or begin normal lending until there is overall economic recovery.

The financial system, meanwhile, can be managed much as it was during the Depression, with regulators weeding out doomed banks and closing them, putting troubled banks under conservatorship and supervising healthy ones closely to prevent excesses. "If we are going to leave insolvent institutions open, it is critically important to replace or at least control management," the Levy paper explains. "Business as usual would be a disaster."

Under these conditions, the government can grant forbearance and prescribe business plans for a slower recovery of bank balance sheets. Instead of buying ruined assets from banks, the government can allow them to sit, possibly for several years, until the economy revives and mortgages or other debt paper regains value. This would amount to an "imposed purgatory" for major banks, keeping them from growing too fast with unsound ventures. Taxpayers will not get off the hook either; government will need to spend hundreds of billions to bail out bankrupt pension funds and pay off insured deposits at failed banks.

Economic stimulus requires preservative measures to stop the bleeding, like a moratorium on home foreclosures and federal lending to the auto industry, as well as force-feeding innovation. Like the financial sector, the reform imperatives must accompany any aid for troubled industries. Do not subsidize more bad behavior by corporate titans or assist companies shipping US jobs and production overseas. In Detroit's case, Washington better get it in writing—an enforceable contract to recover our money if the auto industry doesn't deliver.

President-elect Obama, of course, cannot act directly on any of these matters before January 20. But the Democratic Congress can, since the Treasury cannot spend any of the next $350 billion in the bailout fund without Congressional approval. Congress's first task is to cut off Paulson's water. Representative Dennis Kucinich, as usual, is out front demanding that Congress reject Paulson's request in advance. You can see why Wall Street hates these propositions. No more free money from Washington. No more "masters of the universe." You can also see why the people might be delighted. WILLIAM GREIDER

Peach State Promises

No one, not even the candidates, expected Georgia would see the hottest Senate contest of '08. This Deep South state, which has not elected a Democrat in a major contest for almost a decade, was thought to have gone so reliably red that Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee chair Chuck Schumer struggled to recruit a challenger for GOP Senator Saxby Chambliss. In March, Schumer talked a former state legis-

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Noted.

YOUNG TURKS: Volunteering in record numbers, young people became the superforce of the Obama campaign. Now many progressives hope that these youths' campaign experiences will inspire a lifetime of community service. That's why **thenation.com** and **WireTap** magazine partnered to kick off **You Voted. Now What?**—a series highlighting some of our nation's most inspiring young activists. We begin with an overview of the political landscape in which young people can continue their activism.

Be like Obama: become a community organizer. There are more than 600 youth-led community organizations working on creating green jobs, making college more affordable and organizing for immigrants' rights, among many other issues. **Future5000.com**, a database of youth activism, offers an easy way to search, by region, for campaigns under way. If you're looking at community organizing as a career, there are fellowships that offer financial support at some of the most effective progressive organizations: **the Center for Community Change**, **Young People For**, **the Center for Progressive Leadership** and **PolitiCorps**.

Join the national service. In a campaign speech at the University of Colorado, Obama extolled the virtues of serving one's nation and community. What would this service look like? **AmeriCorps** partners with nonprofit and faith-based organizations to work on issues ranging from public education to environmental cleanup. The **Peace Corps**, established by John F. Kennedy, sends volunteers around the globe to work with governments, schools, nonprofits and entrepreneurs. **Teach for America** recruits recent college graduates to teach for two years in schools in low-income communities. And **YouthBuild** provides education, counseling and job skills to low-income young Americans.

Become a politician. At 27, **Tony Payton** is the youngest member of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives. At 23, **Andrew Gillum** was elected to serve on the Tallahassee City Commission. Payton and Gillum represent the growing number of young elected leaders who want to speak for underrepresented communities. Eighteen- to 35-year-olds represent more than 20 percent of the population but only 4.8 percent of all government seats nationwide. Several programs hope to change that. The **Center for Progressive Leadership** recruits promising leaders from disempowered communities and connects them to organizations through paid internships and fellowships. The **Young Elected Officials Network** provides ongoing personal development and professional support for young elected officials. KRISTINA RIZGA

TIMES OF THE FUTURE: On November 12 tens of thousands of New Yorkers were handed a free copy of the *New York Times* on their way to work. It looked and felt like the paper of record, but above a photo of military helicopters flying into the sunset a headline read, Iraq War Ends. By the end of the day it was revealed that this "special edition" of the *Times* was a prank coordinated by artist/activists **Andy Bichlbaum** of the **Yes Men** and **Steven Lambert** of the **Anti-Advertising Agency** (see nytimes-se.com).

But to dismiss the paper as merely an amusing prank is to underestimate the seriousness of its purpose. The articles are frequently funny, but the politics are sincere. Nation Sets Its Sights on Building Sane Economy, reads one headline; All Public Universities to Be Free, reads another. Even the ads are hopeful: **Exxon** extols "Peace. An idea the world can profit from," and **Monsanto** sells ladybugs for pest control. This edition of the *Times*, as the motto states, contains "All the News We Hope to Print."

"None of this is currently true," Lambert says, "but it's all possible." Early on, the planners of the paper decided to eschew the familiar model of liberal lament about how bad things are. "The challenge isn't to make people think that the war is a bad idea, since most people already do," Bichlbaum explains. "The challenge is to make people feel it can be over now." In order to provoke a visceral experience of political possibility, the artists and their collaborators created what might be described as an artifact of the potential future (the newspaper is dated July 4, 2009). Bichlbaum continues, "We wanted people to read this and say to themselves, What if?"

For forty years the dreams of conservatives have set the parameters of possibility in this country. Liberals, finally in power, need to exercise their atrophied imagination. The *Times* prank is exactly the sort of activist practice we need to rekindle our creativity and set up a new line of progressive thinking that begins with the question: What if? STEPHEN DUNCOMBE

HARPER'S DIRTY DEAL: Canadian Prime Minister **Stephen Harper** didn't skip a beat after **Barack Obama** was elected president; on November 5 he proposed a joint US-Canada pact on climate change. "We need a partner in the matters of the environment if we want to make real progress," Harper argued. His climate-change pact, however, has less to do with curbing global warming than with protecting Canada's status as America's leading oil supplier, specifically that massively profitable reservoir of "dirty oil" known as the Alberta tar sands.

America's privileged access to Canadian oil is guaranteed under NAFTA's "proportionality clause," which obligates Canada to export two-thirds of its oil directly to the United States, almost all of which is extracted from the Alberta tar sands. The largest industrial project in history, the tar sands have drawn nearly $100 billion in investments from companies like **Shell**, **Chevron**, **Exxon** and **Imperial Oil**. An environmental nightmare, it uses vast amounts of water and energy and emits up to three times more carbon dioxide into the atmosphere than conventional oil extraction. Harper's proposed pact would exempt Alberta's "dirty oil" (as Obama's senior energy adviser **Jason Grumet** has described it) from potentially tough new climate-change regulations implied by Obama's promise to shift away from carbon-intensive fuels.

Obama also promised during the campaign to move the United States toward energy independence. Secure access to a North American energy supply like Alberta's dirty oil would help achieve that goal. But in this case, energy independence and clean energy aren't the same thing. So how will Obama respond to Harper's proposal? Stay tuned… BRETT STORY

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lator who had run a losing campaign for lieutenant governor into making what even Democratic loyalists saw as "a mercy run."

But a funny thing happened on the way to November: Jim Martin, a former legal-aid lawyer who had made expanding access to healthcare his Statehouse priority, rejected the apologetic stances usually adopted by Southern Democrats. Martin beat a primary foe who bragged about voting for George W. Bush, and then he ran a fall campaign that highlighted his commitment to bring troops home from Iraq, invest in healthcare and education, and, above all, "protect hard-working Americans from politically powerful special interests like credit card companies, insurance companies, banks and oil companies." Instead of distancing himself from his party's national ticket—a standard Southern Democratic practice in recent years—Martin embraced Barack Obama, whose campaign was making more of a play for the state than any Democratic presidential contender since Bill Clinton.

COMMENT

Martin's bet that Georgia was edging away from the old South and toward the new—going the way of Virginia and North Carolina, as opposed to Alabama and Mississippi—proved right. When the economy went south in September, Obama's numbers went up—nationally and in Georgia—and so did Martin's. Suddenly, the unwinnable race was within reach. And because of the unusual Georgia law that requires a winning candidate for statewide office to gain more than 50 percent of the vote, "within reach" was good enough. On November 4 Chambliss won 49.8 percent, Martin took 46.8 percent and a Libertarian, the remainder. That result set up a December 2 runoff that is arguably the most high-stakes Senate race the country has seen in years. At issue is not just the possibility that Democrats could secure sixty seats in the chamber—a prospect that requires Minnesota Democrat Al Franken to prevail in a recount fight with Norm Coleman and Martin to beat Chambliss. The Georgia runoff is, as well, the first test of Obama's mandate—and of his willingness to spend political capital to extend it. Perhaps more significant, the Georgia contest will provide as clear a signal as we've yet gotten regarding the extent to which candidates can or will compete as unapologetically "national" Democrats in a region that over the past quarter-century has become the GOP heartland.

This is where the runoff gets complicated for the Democrats. The Peach State may be tipping in the party's direction, but it hasn't yet fallen their way, as Virginia and North Carolina did. Georgia Democrats have strongholds in the Atlanta area and in rural counties with large African-American populations. And as retirees and refugees from colder climes have settled around coastal cities like Savannah, Georgia Democrats have begun showing strength in areas where they once had a hard time competing. But will that strength manifest itself December 2?

Schumer's DSCC is in with advertising and Bill Clinton. And Martin's populist appeal, which highlights Chambliss's McCain-like uncertainty about how serious the nation's economic troubles have become, should have multiracial appeal in a state where Democratic candidates must attract African-American as well as white working-class voters. Still, Chambliss has the advantages of incumbency, a determined push by Senate Republicans and their allies to spend what it takes to prevent Democrats from attaining a filibuster-proof majority—and, potentially, election fatigue: if turnout settles back toward normal patterns, the incumbent wins. Martin's chances are rooted in the prospect that Obama really has created a national movement capable of maximizing Democratic turnout even when the president-elect's name isn't on the ballot. Martin is making the connection, declaring that "America has elected Barack Obama president, and now is the time for us to help him succeed."

Obama's team has helped some, keeping campaign offices open, with staffers delivering the "Obama needs Martin" message. But Martin needs Obama. And that's the challenge. If the president-elect makes a serious campaign swing in Georgia, he could generate the turnout among black and young voters that his party's Senate nominee requires. But such a move would call into question Obama's bipartisan positioning during the transition, and it still might not prevent the Chambliss win that Republicans would paint as a rebuke to the new president. In a sense, then, Georgia will be a measure of the extent to which Obama is serious about making all that campaign talk about a fifty-state strategy a reality for his party. Going into Georgia for Martin involves a real risk for Obama. Yet it is in Georgia that Obama could prove that his victory was more than just a personal triumph—that it was, in fact, the beginning of a generational realignment that will extend deeper south than most Democrats—and all Republicans—dared imagine. JOHN NICHOLS

Calvin Trillin, Deadline Poet

Obama Reaches Out to Former Foes

Like Lincoln, he asks foes to help the nation
(The word we used to use was co-optation).
McCain and Clinton both approached the throne.
Now Joe the Plumber's hanging by his phone.

Push Back on Prop 8

"¡Sí, Se Puede! ¡Sí, Se Puede!" roared the crowd of 12,000 protesting passage of Proposition 8 outside Los Angeles City Hall on November 15. Their chants followed Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's declaration, "In the eyes of the law and in the eyes of God, Thou Shalt Not Discriminate!"

California's LGBT community has risen up in anger following homophobic onslaughts before, most notably in 1991, when 50,000 people took to the streets of LA following Governor Pete Wilson's veto of a simple job-equity bill. But this time is different; the right's victory on Prop 8 seems suddenly out of step with the zeitgeist. This is the new Obama era of progressive patriotism, and the homophobes who outgunned the No on 8 campaign seem like a throwback. Jon Stewart, as he parried recently with Bill O'Reilly, named gay marriage as the next step on

COMMENT

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America's long and jagged journey to justice. Could it be that gay marriage, widely blamed for John Kerry's loss four years ago, is the next winning issue on this country's agenda for change?

The Yes on 8 forces ran a brilliant campaign. Along with their usual lies to frighten people about children and religion, they beat us at our own game. The right built a strong multiracial religious coalition that reached African-American and Latino voters across the state, the majority of whom supported Prop 8.

I watched their coming victory with a sinking heart. Thirty years ago, I worked tirelessly against Prop 6 (the Briggs initiative to fire gay teachers), and in 1986 I was Southern California campaign coordinator for No on Prop 64 (the LaRouche initiative to quarantine people living with HIV/AIDS). But this year I poured my political passions into the Obama campaign, working 24/7 to get him elected president. I was based in the main LA office, then in Nevada, where I helped coordinate Latino and African-American volunteers doing voter-to-voter registration and GOTV. Our plan worked magnificently: the Silver State turned deep blue, by 12 percentage points. Working side by side with an amazing team—mostly women, mostly African-American and Latina—I caught the early warning signs on Prop 8. When Yes on 8 signs began sprouting up on her neighbors' lawns in early October, one African-American Obama volunteer, Angie Rodriguez, asked me, "Where are the No on 8 folks? My neighborhood has been visited by the Yes people twice already."

Perhaps more telling was when Mitchell Schwartz, Obama's California director, asked me in mid-October, "Why aren't Barack's own words opposing Prop 8 plastered all over? This was the only proposition he took a stand on, and people need to know it!" When I passed the question on to a friend on No on 8's executive committee, he explained that they had decided that Obama's position was too confusing, because he opposes gay marriage but came out against Prop 8. But that critical decision to set aside Obama's position (until the very end, after a campaign shake-up) allowed the Yes on 8 people to step into the void and put out deceptive fliers and robocalls saying Obama supported Prop 8. If No on 8 had acted early and forcefully, telling Obama's true position, it could have made the difference.

There were other No on 8 campaign mistakes. On GOTV weekend, I walked the streets of Henderson, Nevada, with my friend Phill Wilson, who runs LA's Black AIDS Institute. I was shocked to learn that Phill had never been called by the No on 8 campaign. Nobody in the LA gay community knows better than Phill which African-American church leaders can be moved on gay issues; it's been his life's work for more than two decades. And the powerful LA labor movement, with its sway in the Latino community, was not engaged. A small gay Latino group, Honor PAC, and some independent Latina activists had to take over the East LA No on 8 office in the last weeks. Their heroic work kept the Latino yes vote lower than many had predicted. Another positive story: API Equality, a vigorous grassroots effort in Asian/Pacific Islander communities begun three years ago, also autonomous from the official No on 8 campaign, helped persuade 51 percent of APIs to vote against Prop 8.

In Gus Van Sant's must-see new movie about assassinated San Francisco city supervisor Harvey Milk, there's a scene on election night 1978, when the Briggs initiative went down. Harvey gets a call from Los Angeles County—"We've beat it by 65 percent here!"—and the celebration begins. You can't win on a gay issue in California without winning LA County. In 1978 that meant a savvy, LA-based campaign that delivered the Bradley coalition of white liberals and south-side African-Americans. These days it means engaging real support from our allies in labor—canvassing and phone-banking and not just fundraising. It means going door to door in South and East LA. The No on 8 campaign, with its power center in San Francisco, did neither, forgetting what Milk knew thirty years ago.

But the future looks brighter. Marching in that Saturday protest alongside LGBT community members were thousands of straight supporters. Among them were my new friends from the Obama campaign, now passionate allies in the emerging coalition to undo Prop 8. I didn't have to ask them to come. "I was so busy working for Barack's victory, I forgot to organize my family, but I'm here now, for as long as you need me," said Alma Marquez, the Obama field staffer responsible for statewide Latino outreach, with tears of regret. Alida Garcia-Okoebar, a sister Obama volunteer, told me, "We're all fired up and ready to go! Now we know our next campaign!" Raul Moreno, another Obama campaign friend, told me to call him when we get to work reversing Prop 8: "Sister, you got next!"

If the courts fail to overturn Prop 8, the strategy will likely be to put a hard-to-win pro–gay marriage ballot measure before the people of California in two or four years. In this new era of hope and change, and given the passionate chorus of diverse voices that have chimed in since November 4, I have absolutely no doubt that the rally cries of "¡Sí, se puede!" on marriage equality herald victory next time. TORIE OSBORN

Torie Osborn, senior adviser to Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, is former executive director of the Liberty Hill Foundation and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

John Leonard

Re: John

by TONI MORRISON

The mind refuses sometimes to speak to the heart. Other times the heart muffles its throb or disguises itself as reason.

John Leonard may have understood both tendencies, but to me he seemed one of the very few intellectuals who could balance his heart's love of literature (among other arts) with his mind's profound exactitude. Add to that his gift with language—his command and risk in its use—and one has an astute critic.

He was a rare friend. His company delighted me, always. Whether in Stockholm marveling at pageantry—its joy and seriousness—or laughing hilariously at a Fourth of July party at my house (where, unless I am mistaken, he was the only white person in attendance), or sitting in a chair homing in on a political crisis, or thrilled by a new author's shine, he summoned the sheer satisfaction of being in his company. Incisive, generous, brave and unwaveringly honest, he was a singular human being whose heart embraced his mind. And in the work he leaves behind one can see that the two lived happily together.

Overcoming hesitancy and possibly bad manners, I asked him

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to introduce me at a forthcoming literary event. John accepted with alacrity in one last gesture of generosity cum courage. Someone will be in his place, but no one can take his place.

Everybody's Therapist

by VICTOR NAVASKY

I first became aware of John Leonard in the summer of 1958. I was editing and publishing a tall, thin journal of political satire, *Monocle* (we called it "a leisurely quarterly," because it came out twice a year), which I and a number of friends in and around Yale Law School had founded. One day I saw in the *Harvard Crimson* a take-no-prisoners, 750-word assault on our magazine. The byline: John Leonard, identified as a Harvard sophomore. The review, packed with the dazzling literary-political-cultural-sociological allusions that in later years came to be recognized as Leonard's signature, attacked *Monocle* for its provenance (Yale), its shape (phallic), its style (insufficiently funny) and its content (McCarthyism was yesterday's target—enough already). Other than that…

Naturally, I sent Leonard a note, congratulating him on his parody of a book review and inviting him to write for us. And *mirabile dictu*, five years later, he finally got around to it. But not before he did a yearlong stint as a writer for Bill Buckley's *National Review*. (John later explained that Buckley, having read another of John's undergraduate pieces, called and inquired, "I don't suppose you're at all conservative?" John replied, "I am an artist." He was hired.) When I discovered that he had quit *National Review* and was an anti–Vietnam War activist working for Pacifica radio in Berkeley, California, I again invited him to write for *Monocle*, this time proposing "Confessions of a *National Review* Contributor," which he did in the form of a truly brilliant parody of a letter from Whittaker Chambers (by then a *National Review* senior editor) to his children. A sample: "I am speaking to you, yes; but I am also speaking to Harvard College. To both, I owe an accounting. You see, at the time when most of Harvard College went to Washington to work for the New Frontier, I went to Coventry to work for *National Review*. I call this a Tragedy of History. It left me mentally scarred, victimized by a feeling of guilt and shame the psychologists call, for lack of a better term, the Military-Industrial Complex."

And what with one thing and another, when in 1967 Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, who had been a founding editor of *Monocle*, called to say the *New York Times Book Review*, where he now worked,* was looking to hire a young editor and I threw Leonard's name into the pot, it quickly boiled to the top. John's meteoric rise as subeditor, daily book reviewer, chief editor of the *Book Review* and, later, columnist is not merely the stuff of legend. It *is* legend. It all seemed to happen in fifteen minutes. During his time at the *Times*, John took time out to drink a lot, so much so that eventually he left the paper, took up with *Vanity Fair*, enrolled in rehab at Hazelton and got completely off the booze. After that, he became everybody's therapist.

In 1995 John, along with his wife, Sue Leonard, came to *The Nation* as literary editors, where they specialized in nurturing young, unknown (but not anymore) writers. That did not stop John from writing television reviews for *New York* magazine, doing cultural commentaries on *CBS Sunday Morning* and later writing a regular monthly literary column for *Harper's*, periodic essays for *The New York Review of Books* (not to mention eventually being rediscovered by his old home, the *Times Book Review*) and, of course, publishing the occasional book of essays. But what was *really* remarkable (as distinguished from all of the above, which was *merely* remarkable) was that whenever a fellow employee—be s/he typesetter, janitor or editor—had an alcohol problem, I knew I could count on John to take whatever time was required as adviser/counselor/friend, and he always managed to do it in a way that was helpful without being intrusive.

Toward the end of his career at the *Times*, this most political of culture men used to write a column called "Private Lives." Whatever feminists—and John counted himself among them—meant by that slogan about the personal being political, John lived it, and for this leftish human rights absolutist, the reverse was true as well.

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*Another *Monocle* founder, Richard Lingeman, would later work for John at the *Times Book Review* and then with him and me at *The Nation*, where he toils to this day.

A Beautiful Audience

by GENE SEYMOUR

As far as I'm concerned, the only thing required of a decent critic is that he or she be a decent audience. To borrow a mantra invoked by generations of Vegas hacks, John Leonard was a beautiful audience. It was the principal example he set for hypersensitive couch potatoes like me whose minds were too restless to just sit there and let the media machinery pump helium through our retinas. John may have been the first reviewer I ever read who showed me how I could bring all of my learning, my resources and, above all, my passion to whatever I was staring at or listening to.

You couldn't just be absorbed in what you were witnessing. You had to be engaged. And if you had to bring in your belief systems and your experiences from (as it were) left field, it all poured into the Joyful Noise you were making on culture's behalf. John disparaged artificial barriers of "high," "low" and "middle" and saw the flow of books, movies, TV programs and the rest as a mighty river with estuaries and inlets that were, in Robert Warshow's words, "neither esoteric nor alien."

John's editorial chops have been given relatively short shrift in the wave of commemorations. So let it be emphasized here that the same generosity of spirit and probing insight that served him well as a critic were also his golden credentials as an editor. He took the time to get to know your style and interests the way a parent comes to know his child's tics and yearnings. Always, he looked through and beyond the surface realities to illuminate aspects of your own writing that you didn't know existed. He was, in other words, giving you the same consideration he was giving Toni Morrison, Joan Didion and Gabriel García Márquez—or, for that matter, Carol Burnett, Joan Baez and Ed Sullivan.

To sum up: if one was committed to professional spectatorship, one must use that vocation to exalt the humane and noblest of work, no matter where it exists, and tell as many other spectators as you could find where and how to best appreciate it. If you must slash and burn, do so without sneering or leering. John was my *sensei* in this calling. All I can do now is be as beautiful an audience as he was.

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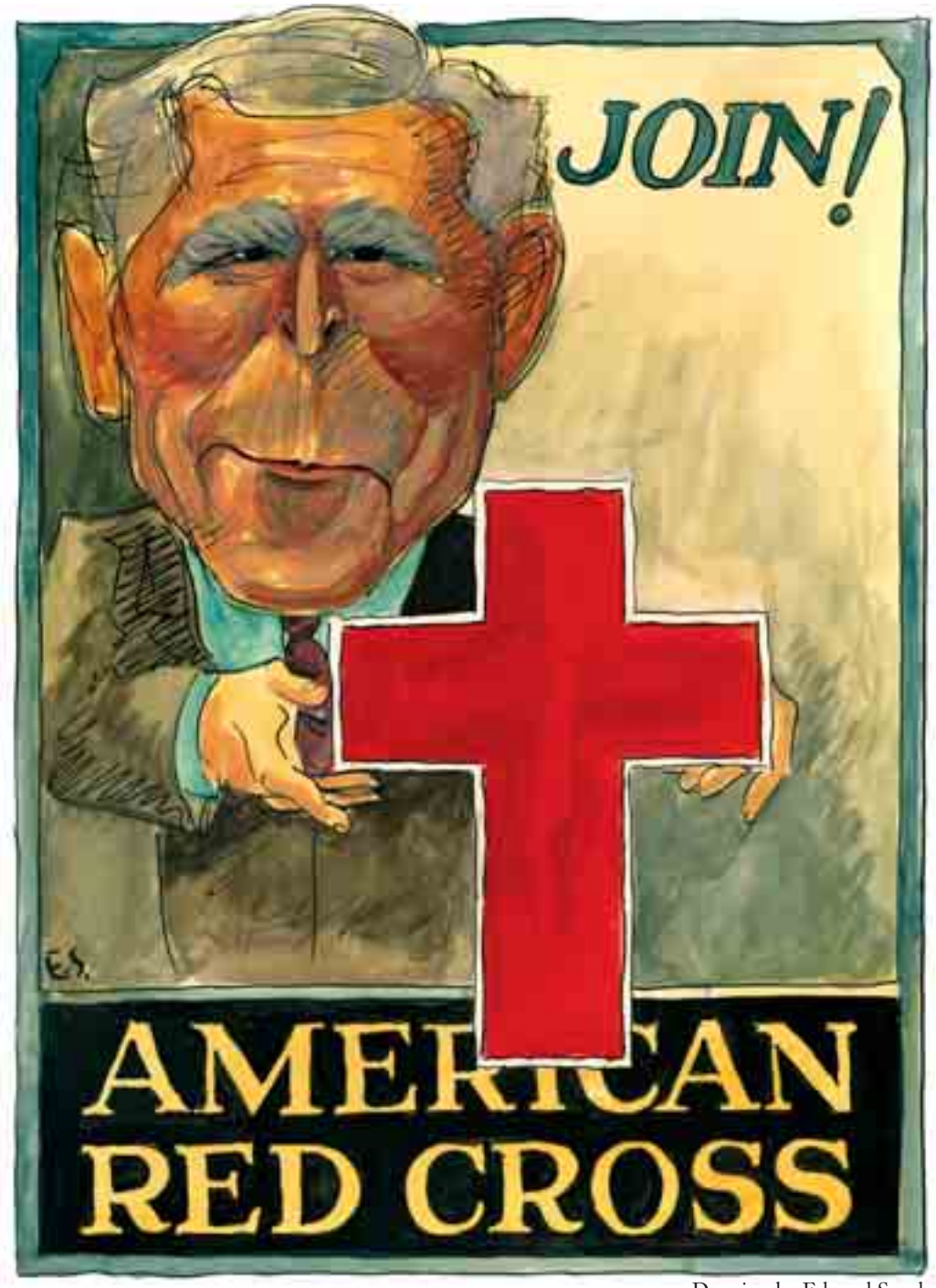

Drawing by Edward Sorel

After leaving office ex-President Bush reportedly will head the American Red Cross where he will push for "vast forward-looking measures" dedicated to "helping future disaster victims help themselves" such as swimming and lifesaving classes for residents of low-lying regions. —Edward Sorel

ANNOUNCING... THE NATION'S RETIRE BUSH CONTEST!
THE QUESTION: WHAT WILL W. DO AFTER LEAVING OFFICE?

Send us your answer, disingenuous or otherwise, in 25 words (more or less). The winner will be chosen by a panel of fair-minded judges (Victor Navasky, Katrina vanden Heuvel, Richard Lingeman). First Prize is an original drawing, based on your entry, by famed *New Yorker* artist Edward Sorel.

ENTRIES: Send to retirebush@thenation.com
DEADLINE: December 31
WINNER TO BE ANNOUNCED: January 12

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Alexander Cockburn

Nail That Double Standard to the Mast!

Since there's one standard for automakers and another for bankers, the quickest way for GM to pick up some loose change would be to buy a few banks and thus get the company's mitts on some of the Treasury's $700 billion. If insurance companies are doing it, why not GM?

A story on the Bloomberg wire on November 17 told us that four of the world's biggest insurers, including Transamerica and Hartford Financial Services Group, may buy some ailing S&Ls in trouble with the Office of Thrift Supervision for making shifty loans. That way the insurance giants can join the excited line at the back door of the Treasury's Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP) and dip into the moolah. "Hartford's $10 million acquisition of Sanford, Florida-based Federal Trust Corp.," Bloomberg's reporters wrote, "may entitle it to $3.4 billion of U.S. capital. Lincoln National in Philadelphia may win access to $3 billion by taking over Newton County Loan & Savings, which has three full-time employees and $7.3 million of assets."

Whenever the issue is one of giving money to big industrial corporations employing real, live workers, particularly workers in labor unions, the commentariat hauls up the Double Standard and nails it to the top mast, next to the Jolly Roger.

Last Sunday I had the usual urge to machine-gun the TV set while listening to the McLaughlin Group, all of whom presumably haul home at least $200,000 a year, as they deplored the unconscionable wages of line workers in Detroit. The same urge flares up when reading the *Wall Street Journal*'s editorial page. As a matter of economic principle, the *WSJ*'s editors have always taken a stern line about letting the weak die in the snow.

In the November issue of *Le Monde diplomatique*, editorial director Serge Halimi quotes George Melloan, a particularly bloodthirsty sidekick of the late Bob Bartley, commander in chief of the *WSJ*'s editorial pages for many years. Melloan once recalled, "Before President Reagan, Jimmy Carter had named Paul Volcker Federal Reserve chairman to kill inflation. Paul invited Bob [Bartley]…and me to lunch at the New York Fed not long after he was selected, and asked: 'When there's blood all over the floor, will you guys still support me?' I responded 'yes' without waiting for Bob, which was [a] clear breach of etiquette. There was blood indeed, as over-extended Latin borrowers and American farmers were caught out by a return to a sound dollar. But we held fast."

So it was the law of the capitalist jungle for millions in Latin America or farmers driven to bankruptcy and suicide in the Midwest, but when it came to prostrate bankers, the Angel of Mercy descended from heaven and took up residence in the *WSJ*'s editorial suite. On September 27 an editorial approved of the $700 billion banker bailout. Then came GM's crisis. On November 10 the Angel of Mercy quit the *Journal*'s editorial page abruptly: "We hope Messrs. Bush and Paulson just say no. The Tarp was intended to save the financial system from collapse, not to be a honey pot for any industry running short of cash."

You see, shoveling money at Goldman Sachs and the other titans of Wall Street constitutes systemic rescue of the billionaires vital to national well-being and self-esteem. Stabilizing the remaining core of America's industrial base, particularly a core infested by people with union cards, is quite another matter. In the same editorial the *Journal* flailed excitedly at its favorite targets: "While GM has spent billions of dollars on labor buyouts in recent years, they are still forced by federal mileage standards to churn out small cars that make little or no profit at plants organized by the United Auto Workers."

Of course, the target of the *WSJ* and of the Republicans and DLC Democrats in Congress is organized labor. The *WSJ* again: "The very success of this U.S. auto industry indicates that highly skilled American workers can profitably churn out cars without being organized by the UAW." The aim is to use the current crisis of GM—a company that in world terms is doing reasonably well—to help it renege yet again on its health obligations to its workers, active and retired, and cheapen the cost of domestic industrial labor. Auto parts factories haven't all been shipped to China. In fact, they are flourishing in the Midwest. It's just that they aren't union shops, aren't as dominated by the white and black working class; rather, they are nonunion, usually anti-union, sweatshop-type factories with few benefits and an increasingly Latino and undocumented workforce. These shops have been springing up and expanding over the past few years, but the workers have had virtually zero bargaining power. Remember also, being mindful of the November 4 benchmark in America's history, that those auto plants really are the last stand for the black industrial working class.

If America loses its auto industry, it means maybe 5 percent of the workforce will be on the street. Finance capital wants it all. The head of the FDIC wants $24 billion to help mortgage holders, and Paulson says no. GM wants $25 billion in loans, and Washington says no. The Democrats had better remember who put them back in power and in the White House.

Obama doesn't need to read histories of FDR's first 100 days to know something elementary. As economist Paul Craig Roberts remarked in *CounterPunch* recently, "A country that doesn't make anything doesn't need a financial sector as there is nothing to finance." A country without decent manufacturing jobs doesn't have citizens and immigrants with the money to buy things, hence to keep the economy afloat. A country without a sane housing policy will end up with nothing but palaces and trailer parks. A government seeking a sane manufacturing policy, a sane housing program and a well-considered strategy for investment and recovery cannot hope to move in this direction with Wall Street financiers in the control room. ■

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Katha Pollitt

The People's Choice

Something else remarkable happened on election day: voters rejected all three anti-abortion measures on the ballot. In socially conservative South Dakota, voters said no to an abortion ban with narrow exceptions for rape, incest and grave risk to the woman's health or life, even though in 2006, when they rejected a near-total ban, they told pollsters they wanted exactly those exceptions. In Colorado, home base of Focus on the Family and many other right-wing religious groups and churches, they refused to declare that personhood begins with conception. In California, for the third time in four years, they rejected a parental notification requirement. These were solid wins. Coloradans rejected fetal personhood three to one—and fetal personhood is the foundational doctrine of the "right-to-life" movement. In California, the vote was 52 to 48, despite the conservative draw of the gay marriage ban.

What do these prochoice victories tell us? Antichoicers aren't winning any popularity contests by pursuing fruitless campaigns to "increase the social tension over abortion," as Colorado Right to Life leader Bob Enyart put it. Americans may not love abortion but they want it to be legal, and they are often more liberal about it than their answers to abstract questions on polls reveal. Polls regularly show that almost three-quarters of Americans support parental notification; majorities say they would ban abortion for all but a few extreme situations (majorities also support *Roe v. Wade*—go figure). But when voters actually have to decide what the law should be, hear the arguments on both sides and think through the implications of restrictions, common sense can win.

Prochoicers won the trifecta, and that, along with the rejection of McCain/Palin, gives President-elect Obama a mandate. Antichoicers have had the White House in their pocket for eight years and have achieved nothing but social division and the promotion of bad science, plus more unwanted pregnancies, sexual ignorance, disease and, in the developing world, death. They have wasted millions of federal dollars on futile abstinence-only sex ed and deceptive "crisis pregnancy centers"; they've starved reproductive health services here and abroad while enriching anti-sex entrepreneurs like Leslee Unruh of South Dakota's Abstinence Clearinghouse. The voters have spoken: enough is enough.

Obama should ignore pundits like E.J. Dionne who want him to stiff the prochoice majority that put him in the White House. Instead he should:

1. Reverse Bush's antichoice executive orders: overturn the global gag rule cutting off funds for groups abroad that even mention abortion; reallocate money to the distribution of condoms to fight AIDS in Africa; release the $32 million Congress budgets annually for the UN Population Fund; cover pregnant women under S-CHIP in their own right, not as housing for fetuses; and rescind pending HHS regulations that would force hospitals and clinics to let antichoice staff impede their work.

2. Pledge to staff federal agencies like the FDA, HHS and NIH—which exercise tremendous power over reproductive-health policy—with top scientists and physicians from the reality-based community: no more oddballs, ideologues, religious zealots and third-raters. Remind the nation that these agencies are dedicated to public health in a pluralist society, not to furthering the moral agenda of a minority. Women here and abroad, gays and other sexual minorities deserve public servants who will zealously defend our freedoms—and fight to expand them, too. Antichoicers can run the Transportation Department, where they can't do too much damage.

3. Lean on Congress. Push legislation to defund abstinence-only sex ed—which study after study has shown to be ineffective. Beef up realistic sex ed and dramatically increase funding for Title X, the family-planning program for low-income women, which Bush allowed to shrink through inflation. Support the Equity in Prescription Insurance and Contraceptive Coverage Act, which would require insurance plans that pay for prescription drugs (like, um, Viagra) to cover contraception. And support the DeLauro/Ryan Reducing the Need for Abortion and Supporting Parents Act, which would increase contraception for low-income women and help them continue their pregnancies if they wish. Vigorously back the Freedom of Choice Act, which would codify and protect abortion rights.

4. Build support for reproductive rights by expanding the concept to guarantee the dignity of pregnant women and their right to respectful, noncoercive prenatal and maternity care. This country is approaching a one-in-three C-section rate—that's shocking. Our rates of maternal and infant mortality, preterm births and low-birthweight babies are also way too high. If Obama wants to build common ground with antichoicers—or call their bluff—this is a very good place to start. Lynn Paltrow of the National Advocates for Pregnant Women would be the perfect adviser.

5. Put contraceptive research at the top of the scientific to-do list and get the best minds working on it night and day. It's a new century—let's have newer, simpler, sexier, cheaper fail-safe birth control, for both sexes, preferably available over the counter at every drugstore in the land. And speaking of drugstores, could Obama please, graciously but firmly, tell pharmacists who won't fill prescriptions for birth control and emergency contraception that they are in the wrong line of work?

For all the joy and relief so many of us felt at Obama's election—I'm still floating—relaxing would be a mistake. He'll be under huge pressure to compromise away his victory: to take feminists and progressives for granted and court the religious right—even though, according to *Politico*, white weekly churchgoers were no more likely to vote for him than for John Kerry.

Yes, at last we have a prochoice president. But he needs us to keep him that way. ■

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Books & the Arts.

Alone Among the Ghosts

by MARCELA VALDES

COURTESY THE ARTIST

Carla Rippey's *The Gardens of Ciudad Juárez* (2006)

The Part About the Author

Shortly before he died of liver failure in July 2003, Roberto Bolaño remarked that he would have preferred to be a detective rather than a writer. Bolaño was 50 years old at the time, and by then he was widely considered to be the most important Latin American novelist since Gabriel García Márquez. But when Mexican *Playboy* interviewed him, Bolaño was unequivocal. "I would have liked to be a homicide detective, much more than a writer," he told the magazine. "Of that I'm absolutely sure. A string of homicides. Someone who could go back alone, at night, to the scene of the crime, and not be afraid of ghosts."

Detective stories, and provocative remarks, were always passions of Bolaño's—he once declared James Ellroy among the best living writers in English—but his interest in gumshoe tales went beyond matters of plot and style. In their essence, detective stories are investigations into the motives and mechanics of violence, and Bolaño—who moved to Mexico the year of the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre and was imprisoned during the 1973 military coup in his native Chile—was also obsessed with such matters. The great subject of his *oeuvre* is the relationship between art and infamy, craft and crime, the writer and the totalitarian state.

In fact, all of Bolaño's mature novels scrutinize how writers react to repressive regimes. *Distant Star* (1996) grapples with Chile's history of death squads and *desaparecidos* by conjuring up a poet turned serial killer. *The Savage Detectives* (1998) exalts a gang of young poets who joust against state-funded writers during the years of Mexico's dirty wars. *Amulet* (1999) revolves around a middle-aged poet who survives the government's 1968 invasion of the Autonomous University of Mexico by hiding in a bathroom. *By Night in Chile* (2000) depicts a literary salon where writers party in the same house in which dissidents are tortured. And Bolaño's final, posthumous novel, *2666*, is also spun from ghastly news: the murder, since 1993, of more than 430 women and girls in the Mexican state of Chihuahua, particularly in Ciudad Juárez.

Often these victims disappear while on their way to school or returning home from work or while they're out dancing with friends. Days or months later, their bodies turn up—tossed in a ditch, the middle of the desert or a city dump. Most are strangled; some are knifed or burned or shot. One-third show signs of rape. Some show signs of torture. The oldest known victims are in their 30s; the youngest are elementary-school age. In January of this year at least four such girls and women were killed. Since 2002 these murders have been the subject of a Hollywood film (*Bordertown*, starring Jennifer Lopez), several nonfiction books, a number of documentaries and a flood of demonstrations in Mexico and abroad. According to Amnesty International, over half of the so-called "femicides" have not resulted in a conviction.

Bolaño was fascinated by these cold cases long before the murders became a cause célèbre. In 1995 he sent a letter from Spain to his old friend in Mexico City, the visual artist Carla Rippey (who is portrayed as the beautiful Catalina O'Hara in *The Savage Detectives*), mentioning that for years he'd been working on a novel called "The Woes of the True Policeman." Though he had other manuscripts on submission to publishers, this book, Bolaño wrote, "is MY NOVEL." Set in northern Mexico, in a town called Santa Teresa, it revolved around

2666
By Roberto Bolaño.
Translated by Natasha Wimmer.
Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 898 pp. $30.

Marcela Valdes's last publication in The Nation *was "Windows Into the Night." Research support for this article was provided by the Investigative Fund of The Nation Institute.*

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a literature professor who had a 14-year-old daughter. The manuscript had already topped "eight hundred thousand pages," he boasted; it was "a demented tangle that surely no one will understand."

Surely, it seemed so then. Bolaño was 43 when he sent this missive, and as near to failure as he'd ever been. Though he'd published two books of poetry, co-written a novel and spent five years entering short story contests all over Spain, he was so broke that he couldn't afford a telephone line, and his work was almost entirely unknown. Three years earlier, he and his wife had separated; around the same time he was diagnosed with the liver disease that would kill him eight years later. Though Bolaño won many of the short story contests he entered, his novels were routinely rejected by publishers. Yet late in 1995 he would begin an astonishing rise.

As each one of Bolaño's novels found more readers, he toiled away on his demented tangle.

The turning point was a meeting with Jorge Herralde, the founder and director of the publishing house Editorial Anagrama. Though Herralde couldn't buy *Nazi Literature in the Americas*—it was snapped up by Seix Barral—he invited Bolaño to visit him in Barcelona. There Bolaño told him about his cash problems and the desperation he felt over the many rejections he'd received. "I told him that…I'd love to read his other manuscripts, and shortly afterward he brought me *Distant Star* (later I found out that it had also been rejected by other publishing houses, including Seix Barral)," the editor recalls in an essay. Herralde, however, found the book extraordinary. Thereafter, he published all of Bolaño's fiction: nine books in seven years.

During that time, as each volume found more readers than its predecessor, Bolaño toiled away on his demented tangle. The work involved writing, of course, but also investigating. By setting his novel in Santa Teresa, a fictional town in Sonora, rather than in Juárez, Bolaño was able to blur the lines between what he knew and what he imagined. But he was deeply concerned with understanding the circumstances facing Juárez and its inhabitants. Bolaño was already familiar with the region's bleak, arid landscape—he'd traveled to northern Mexico during the 1970s—but the femicides didn't begin until sixteen years after he had left for Europe, and he'd never visited Juárez. Since he didn't know anyone living in the city, his knowledge was limited to what he could find in newspapers and on the Internet. From these sources he would have learned that Juárez had become the perfect place to commit a crime.

Once a watering hole for Americans during Prohibition, Juárez grew rapidly after NAFTA was implemented in the 1990s. Hundreds of assembly plants sprang up, luring hundreds of thousands of destitute residents from all over Mexico to take jobs that often paid as little as 50 cents an hour. The same traits that made Juárez appealing to NAFTA manufacturers—good roads, proximity to a large consumer market, an abundance of unorganized labor—also made it an ideal hub for *narcotraficantes*. By 1996, some 42 million people and 17 million vehicles were traveling through the city every year, making it one of the busiest transit points on the US-Mexico border and a favorite for illegal crossings. The town transformed itself into a crossroads for cheap and illicit commerce; as it did, poor, hardworking women began turning up dead.

Juárez and its fictional counterpart bear little resemblance to the cultural centers where Bolaño set most of his novels—even *Distant Star* takes place in the most important university town in southern Chile. There are no writing workshops amid the shantytowns of Santa Teresa, nor gangs of rebellious poets. Like all of Bolaño's fiction, *2666* teems with writers, artists and intellectuals, but these characters come from elsewhere: from Europe, South America, the United States and Mexico City. Stuck in the badlands of northern Mexico, the same region where Cormac McCarthy's gang of merry killers rampage in *Blood Meridian*, Santa Teresa is literally and culturally parched.

The link between this industrial desert and the settings of Bolaño's previous novels lies, like a scarlet letter, on the book's front cover. The devilish date 2666—which appears nowhere in the pages of *2666*—sends us on a scavenger hunt to *Amulet*, where it crops up in the waking nightmares of a woman named Auxilio Lacouture. Visions of hell besiege Auxilio from the novel's earliest pages, when she peers into a flower vase and sees "everything that people have lost, everything that causes pain and that is better off forgotten."

Later, as she walks through the streets of Mexico City, she has another evil hallucination. It's the middle of the night. The streets she crosses are vacant and windy. At that hour, Auxilio says, Avenida Reforma "turns into a transparent tube, a cuneiform lung where you feel the city's imaginary breath," and Avenida Guerrero "looks like nothing more than a cemetery…a cemetery from the year 2666, a cemetery forgotten under a dead or unborn eyelid, bathed in the dispassionate fluids of an eye that, for wanting to forget something, has ended forgetting everything."

2666, like all of Bolaño's work, is a graveyard. In his 1998 acceptance speech for the Rómulo Gallego's Prize, Bolaño revealed that in some way everything he wrote was "a letter of love or of goodbye" to the young people who died in the dirty wars of Latin America. His previous novels memorialized the dead of the 1960s and '70s. His ambitions for *2666* were greater: to write a postmortem for the dead of the past, the present and the future.

The Part About the Crimes

Bolaño put off the possibility of a liver transplant so he could complete *2666*, but the illness grew more acute and he died before he reached the book's end. After the funeral, his friend and literary executor, the Spanish book critic Ignacio Echevarría, combed through the manuscripts in Bolaño's office to assemble the work that Anagrama published in 2004, and that Natasha Wimmer, the gifted translator of *The Savage Detectives*, has now brought into English.

Bolaño marked his manuscripts carefully. He may have been reckless, but he wasn't stupid, and he knew that he was dying. Yet Anagrama broke with his wishes on one point. For years Bolaño had talked about *2666* as one book, bragging that it would be "the fattest novel in the world," but in the final months of his life, he decided to break up the novel's five sections and publish them as separate books. The reasons behind this impulse were practical. Bolaño would leave behind two young children, to whom he dedicated *2666*, and he wanted to provide for them after his death. Five short novels, he figured, would earn more money than one backbreaking monster. Thankfully, his family and Anagrama did him the favor of following his original vision. As Echevarría notes in his epilogue, "although the five parts that comprise *2666* may be read independently, they not only share many elements (a subtle web of recurring themes), they also join unequivocally in a unified design." Meanwhile, here in the States, the book's publisher, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, is hedging its bets: putting out both a 2.75-pound hardcover and a three-volume slipcased paperback edition.

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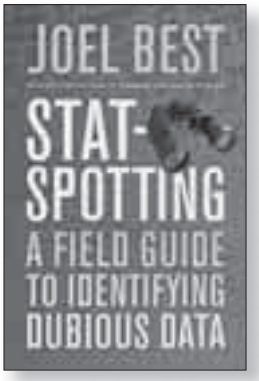

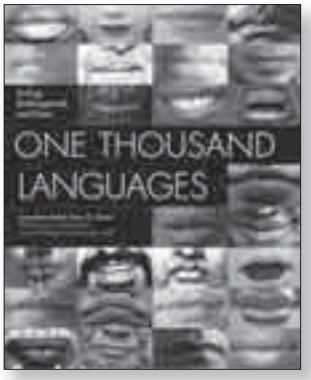

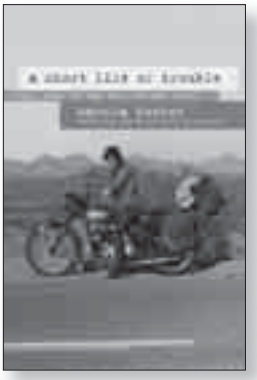

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Either way, *2666* isn't for the faint of heart. The book is nearly 900 pages long, and charting its locations would yield something like an airline flight map, red dots marking landings in Argentina, England, France, Germany, Italy, Mexico, Poland, Prussia, Romania, Russia, Spain and the United States. As if such globe-trotting wasn't enough, the novel also contains scores of characters and covers almost an entire century of history.

Bolaño once wrote that in the Americas, all modern fiction springs from two sources: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Moby-Dick*. *The Savage Detectives*, with its carousing characters, is Bolaño's novel of friendship and adventure. *2666* chases the white whale. For Bolaño, Melville's novel held the key to writing about "the land of evil"; and like Melville's saga, *2666* can be stunning or soporific, depending on your taste for the slow burn. I've read it three times, and I find it to be dense, brilliant and horrifying, with scattered scenes of cleverness and fun.

Page one plunges us into the lives of four European academics who adore the books of a reclusive German author named Benno von Archimboldi almost as much as they enjoy luring each other to bed. Bolaño's approach to the murders in the first two parts of *2666*—"The Part About the Critics" and "The Part About Amalfitano"—is coy, elliptical. Not for him the rapid gore of Patricia Cornwell or Stephen King. The first, glancing mention of the crimes doesn't occur until forty-three pages into the book, and only two of the three professors who visit Santa Teresa in the first part even hear about the murders. They are visitors to Mexico, and though they dabble in sex tourism, their wealth and indifference insulate them from the realities of the city.

"The Part About Amalfitano"—which clearly derives from the book Bolaño described to Rippey in 1995—moves closer to the locals, while still keeping the murders at arm's length. If part one is a brainy romance, part two is an existential drama. A Chilean philosophy professor who has left Europe for the University of Santa Teresa founders in quiet desperation. He fears that he's going crazy—a voice speaks to him at night. He fears that the city's violence may reach out and grab his daughter—a black car keeps appearing just outside his house.

Careful readers will spy hints of what's to come, like so many red fingerprints, throughout these two sections, but it isn't until the third part, "The Part About Fate," that the violence of Santa Teresa spills into the foreground. Standing in a bar, a naïve American reporter sees a man across the room punch a woman: "The first blow made the woman's head snap violently and the second blow knocked her down." The reporter had driven to Mexico to see another kind of beating—a fight between an American boxer and his Mexican rival—but he soon learns that the real blows in Santa Teresa occur outside the ring. Befriended by some of the seedier elements of the city, he is shown what appears to be the video of a woman being raped. He meets the chief suspect in the city's murders, and he winds up peeling out of town afraid of the police.

This noir escapade is prelude to a dirge. "The Part About the Crimes" opens in January 1993 with the description of the corpse of a 13-year-old girl and ends 108 bodies later during Christmas 1997. Each one of these forensic discoveries is clinically detailed—at 284 pages, the section is the longest in the book—and the resulting chronicle of death is braided through with the narratives of four detectives, one reporter, the chief suspect in the crimes and various ancillary characters. In Bolaño's hands, this collage produces terrific fugue-like sequences and damning repetitions. ("The case was soon closed" becomes a haunting refrain.) Bolaño lightens these grim story lines with flashes of gallows humor and the occasional tender subplot. Overall, however, reading "The Part About the Crimes" feels like staring into the abyss. Strangling, shooting, stabbing, burning, rape, whipping, mutilation, bribery and treachery are all detailed in deadpan prose. "In the middle of November," a typical paragraph runs:

> Andrea Pacheco Martínez, thirteen, was kidnapped on her way out of Vocational School 16.... When she was found, two days later, her body showed unmistakable signs of strangulation, with a fracture of the hyoid bone. She had been anally and vaginally raped. There was tumefaction of the wrists, as if they had been bound. Both ankles presented lacerations, by which it was deduced that her feet had also been tied. A Salvadorean immigrant found the body behind the Francisco I School, on Madero, near Colonia Álamos. It was fully dressed, and the clothes, except for the shirt, which was missing several buttons, were intact.

Those who've sampled Bolaño's other fictions will recognize the cool detachment of this passage. But the level of grisly detail is like nothing in any of Bolaño's previous works—or in any of the newspaper accounts he could have read. His descriptions of the murder investigations, and of the incidents surrounding the trial of the chief suspect, are equally precise and uncanny.

How did Bolaño become so intimate with the details of these crimes, and the procedures of the local police, when he lived an ocean away? His other investigative novels were written after the fresh blood of history had dried; even then, Bolaño had always drawn from firsthand knowledge of the events or from that of his friends. Yet at the time he was writing "The Part About the Crimes," information about the murders in Juárez was quite restricted. To pull off this kind of hyperrealism, he must have had the help of someone on the inside, someone whose interest in autopsy was as relentless as his own.

For Bolaño, *Moby-Dick* held the key to writing about evil. In *2666*, Bolaño chases his white whale.

The Part About the Journalist

In the summer of 1995, the year Bolaño wrote to Carla Rippey, the bodies of several young women were discovered semi-nude and strangled just south of Juárez, near the local airport. That September the city offered a $1,000 reward for information about The Predator. A month later, police arrested Abdel Latif Sharif Sharif, an Arab-American with a history of sexual aggression, and charged him with the five murders, plus a few others committed in September. But two months later, while Sharif Sharif awaited trial in prison, fresh corpses began to appear. The police maintained that Sharif Sharif, a chemist, had directed these murders from his cell, paying $1,200 for each woman killed. His accomplices, they said, were eight teenage boys they arrested in a sweep of nightclubs. They were called The Rebels.

Almost 1,000 miles away, in Mexico City, this news fascinated a reporter named Sergio González Rodríguez. A novelist and arts journalist, González Rodríguez had launched his career during the 1980s by doing reviews for Carlos Mosiváis, a leading cultural critic and a pioneer of the *nueva crónica*, or New Journalism, style in Mexico. By the time the newspaper *Reforma* came

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calling in 1993, González Rodríguez was well known as a centrist critic who wasn't afraid of riling the government: he'd been fired from the magazine *Nexos* for publishing an article in *Reforma* that questioned the ethics of intellectuals who allied themselves with then-President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, who'd been elected in 1988 amid widespread allegations of voter fraud. This independent temperament made González Rodríguez a good match for *Reforma*—the paper had a history of serious investigative reporting—and he was hired to edit one of the paper's weekend cultural supplements, "El Ángel." (These days González Rodríguez still serves as the section's editorial consultant. He also writes three regular columns for the paper.)

News of the femicides in Juárez reminded González Rodríguez of the film *Silence of the Lambs*.

The news from Juárez reminded González Rodríguez of the movie *Silence of the Lambs*, which he'd seen a few years earlier. Could it be, he wondered, that Ciudad Juárez held a real Hannibal Lecter? Answering that question wasn't part of his regular beat, but as he explained to me in a series of interviews last summer, he'd always been interested in literature about violence. His favorite books include Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song* and Hans Magnus Enzensberger's *Politics and Crime*. He already had plans to travel to the state of Chihuahua to teach a seminar. It wasn't hard to persuade *Reforma* to pay for a jumper flight from there to Juárez so he could report on a press conference that the chief suspect planned to hold, in prison, on April 19, 1996.

That day González Rodríguez watched a tall, middle-aged man with green eyes talk to some thirty reporters. Sharif Sharif barely spoke Spanish—he'd lived in Mexico for less than a year—so he gave his presentation in English while a bilingual reporter translated. What he said sounded like a soap opera. According to Sharif Sharif, the femicides were being committed by a pair of rich Mexican cousins, one who lived in Juárez and the other just over the border in El Paso. He told a love story involving one of the cousins and a poor, beautiful girl from Juárez. The press corps was annoyed—they exchanged glances, cracked jokes. González Rodríguez felt pretty skeptical himself, but the critic in him was intrigued by Sharif Sharif's style. Rather than pound his chest and declare his innocence, the suspect calmly recounted his ninety-minute tale. He seemed to believe that if he provided an alternate explanation for the murders, the charges against him would be dropped.

At the end of the session, González Rodríguez introduced himself to a local reporter. In a park near the prison, the two chatted about the strange presentation. A mother and her daughter approached them.

Are you journalists? the mother asked.

Yes, they answered.

Then we want to tell you something we think that you should know.

The 14-year-old girl beside her wore a T-shirt, jeans and sneakers. She told the reporters that the Juárez chief of police had forced her to accuse The Rebels. The chief, she said, had taken her by the hair and banged her against a wall until she agreed to say exactly what he told her.

For González Rodríguez, perspective suddenly shifted. Old facts (the nightclub sweep, the escalating charges against Sharif Sharif) glittered in a new light: the police were beating witnesses. "This," he thought, "is the undercurrent." Later, he learned that while Sharif Sharif had been holding forth in prison, the State Commission on Human Rights had announced that six of the eight witnesses against The Rebels had been detained illegally by the Juárez police.

González Rodríguez flew back to Mexico City and published an article about his findings and the suspicious treatment of the witnesses. Soon after, *Reforma* asked him to join a special investigations unit devoted to the situation in Juárez. The head of the unit, Rossana Fuentes Berain, sent a journalist undercover into the factories where many of the murder victims had worked; she assigned other reporters to track the details of individual police investigations. González Rodríguez was given the task of studying the big picture for patterns and motivations. Though Berain edited González Rodríguez like any other reporter—sometimes demanding that he corroborate sources or provide additional proofs for his more damning assessments—she also allowed him considerable interpretive leeway.

For three years he traveled back and forth between Juárez and Mexico City, juggling book and film reviews with criminal investigation, until, in the summer of 1999, his reporting began to suggest that the policemen, government officials and drug traffickers of Juárez were all connected to one another, and to the femicides. An attack on the son of Sharif Sharif's lawyer earlier that year had hardened his suspicions. Why would someone attack a lawyer's son if the justice system was functioning properly? he wondered. Then, on June 12, together with a reporter from the *El Paso Times*, González Rodríguez interviewed a prisoner who implicated local police and a prominent senator in the femicides.

In his book *Huesos en el desierto*, González Rodríguez recounts that three days later he was kidnapped and assaulted by two men in Mexico City. He had hailed a taxi in the posh neighborhood of Condesa, heading home after a late night. The taxi drove for a while and then stopped. Two armed men jumped aboard. They ordered González Rodríguez to close his eyes and sit between them in the back seat. The taxi took off—the driver was complicit. Though González Rodríguez didn't resist his captors, the men cursed him, punched him, pistol-whipped him and pierced his legs with an ice pick. They would kill him in a deserted spot south of the capital, they said. The taxi stopped again. One of the men got out, and another, whom they called The Boss, sat down. The beatings and threats of rape and death resumed. A patrol car passed nearby with its flashers on. The men dumped González Rodríguez on the street. He filed a police report and went to see a doctor, who prescribed painkillers and bed rest. On June 18, his article "Police Are Fingered as Accomplices [in Juárez]" appeared in *Reforma*.

For the next two months, González Rodríguez lived like a zombie, writing reviews, editing his section and going out with friends even as his vision clouded, his speech slurred and his memory disintegrated. Finally, on August 11, when he couldn't even brew a cup of coffee in his own home, two friends from *Reforma* rushed him to a hospital, where he had emergency surgery to remove a life-threatening hematoma that was pressing on his brain.

Against all expectations, he made a complete recovery, but the beating marked a turning point in his life. Before the attack, González Rodríguez had had problems with his home and cellphones—strange noises, deficiencies in service. After, he was often followed. His friend Paola Tinoco recalls that whenever she and González Rodríguez ate in a restaurant in the months following his surgery, they were watched by people wearing earphones. Terrified and helpless, the two took refuge in humor, telling each other absurd stories every time the strangers

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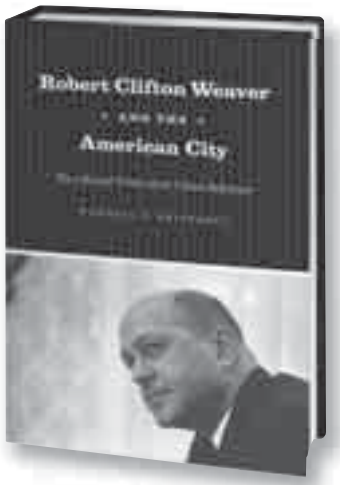

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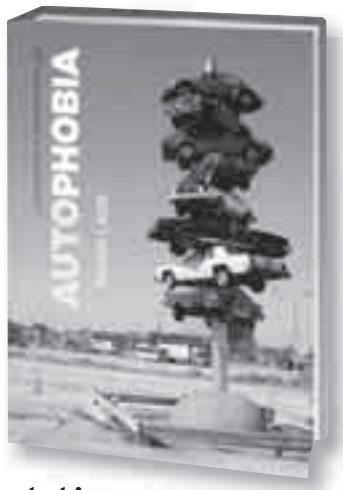

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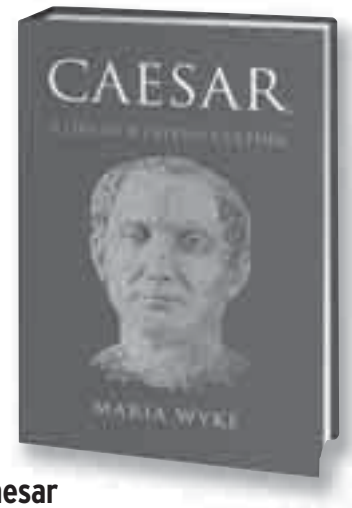

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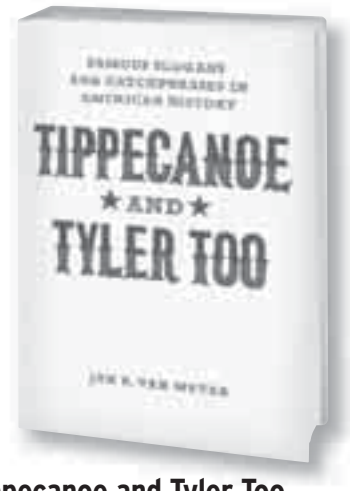

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were present. One night, for example, they recited the lyrics to a popular children's song called "The Ducky":

> Ducky goes running and searching
> in her purse-y
> For pennies to feed her own little
> duckies
> Because she knows that when she
> gets back
> All the ducks will run up and ask
> What did you bring me, Mamá,
> quack quack?
> What did you bring me, quack
> quack?

When González Rodríguez flew to Juárez in 1995 looking for a Hollywood-style serial killer, he recalls, "I had no idea what I was getting into." Instead of Hannibal Lecter, he found a system of impunity that protected the worst criminals in Juárez, simply because they were ruthless and rich, a system that implicated the police and judicial institutions of the city, the state and the country. Once he drew these conclusions, there was no going back. "You're in a hell," he says, "that you don't know why you've been chosen to live." The heat incinerated many of his old illusions about accountability and justice, revealing Mexico's black heart.

Huesos and *2666* are like freshly dug graves—but shadowed by different philosophies of evil.

The authorities, he believed, were deliberately trying to confuse and obscure the realities in Juárez, suggesting that the numbers were exaggerated, or that the murders were crimes of passion, or that the victims were prostitutes. He wanted to make a permanent record of his findings to contradict those stories, a record that wouldn't be tossed out at week's end.

The Part About the Correspondence

The year that González Rodríguez was first attacked, Bolaño had been working on his demented tangle for more than half a decade. Searching for information about Juárez, Bolaño e-mailed his friends in Mexico, asking more and more detailed questions about the murders. Finally, tired of these gruesome inquiries, his friends put him in touch with González Rodríguez, who, they said, knew more about the crimes than anyone in Mexico. Bolaño first e-mailed him around the time that González Rodríguez decided to write a nonfiction book about his investigation.

In retrospect, it's strange the two didn't correspond earlier. They were roughly the same age: González Rodríguez was born in 1950, Bolaño in 1953. Both had been part of Mexico City's counterculture in the 1970s: Bolaño tramping about town with the Infrarealist poets, González Rodríguez playing bass for a heavy-metal band called Grupo Enigma. Both began writing novels late and prided themselves on the integrity of their literary judgments. They had several friends in common: Jorge Herralde and the critic and novelist Juan Villoro. And in middle age both were consumed by Juárez.

González Rodríguez could tell right away that Bolaño's interest in the crimes wasn't a whim. "It wasn't a temp job, like that of so many novelists," González Rodríguez says. "It was the passion of a lifetime. He would say to me, What you do think of such and such text? He had read everything."

What Bolaño needed, González Rodríguez explains, was help with the details of the murders and the police investigations, because the press accounts of them were too vague. He wanted to know how the narcos in Juárez operated, what cars they drove, what weapons they carried. "What he liked was precision," González Rodríguez says. In the case of weapons, for example, Bolaño wanted to know not just the brand but also the model and the caliber.

He was also interested in connecting with the mentality of Chihuahua's police to understand the particularities of their conduct and misconduct. He wanted to know exactly how murder cases were written up. He wanted a copy of a forensic report; González Rodríguez unearthed one in the papers he'd gotten from a defense lawyer. At Bolaño's request, he transcribed a section describing the victim's injuries. "He wanted to know the language of forensic investigation," González Rodríguez recalls. It is this language that appears in "The Part About the Crimes."

"I imagine, based on what he would ask me, that what he wanted was to compare notes," González Rodríguez says. "I'd say that the savage detective wanted the other savage detective, who is me, to draw analogous conclusions." Yet any writer knows that sharing conclusions often changes them. Comparing notes with González Rodríguez, Bolaño may have altered a few long-held beliefs. Take, for example, the two detectives' discussion of Robert K. Ressler, the former FBI criminologist who visited Juárez in 1998 to consult on the murders, thanks to a deal made between Mexico's Congress and its attorney general. Bolaño had already read Ressler's famous books—among them, *Sexual Homicide* and *Crime Classification Manual*—and he was amazed that Ressler didn't solve the murders during his trip.

Why didn't Ressler catch the killer? he asked.

That trip was just window dressing, González Rodríguez remembers telling him. He explained that Ressler had come to Juárez unprepared. He didn't bring his own translator. He was paid by the same authorities who might be implicated by his findings. He had to review criminal files in Spanish, a language he didn't know. He was given a bodyguard who watched everything he did. This information, González Rodríguez remembers, hit Bolaño like cold water.

"He wanted to believe that there was a rational power that could conquer the criminal," he observes. In fact, such a triumphant ratiocinator appears in all Bolaño's novels—except for *2666*. In *Distant Star*, the serial killer is caught by detective Abel Romero, with the help of a smart poet. In *By Night in Chile*, the crimes of the literati are unearthed by an anonymous young detective. Another anonymous interrogator traces the history of Arturo Belano and Ulises Lima in *The Savage Detectives*, while these two young poets successfully locate the mysterious writer Cesárea Tinajero—whom they find in a town near Santa Teresa.

Only in *2666* do criminals slip the noose, trapping and killing or beating every Nosy Parker who comes their way. Significantly, in the final version of *2666*, the character based on Ressler (Albert Kessler) first appears as a cunning, if tactless, detective, only to have the rug pulled out from under his investigation several pages later.

More fundamentally, González Rodríguez told Bolaño how his findings suggested that the killings in Juárez were connected to the local police and politicians and to the mercenary gangs maintained by the drug cartels. The police don't seriously investigate the murders, he explained, because they're badly trained, or they're misogynists, or they've made deals that allow the narcos to operate with impunity.

So there's no serial killer? González Rodríguez recalls Bolaño asked him.

No, of course there's a serial killer, González Rodríguez replied. But it's not just one

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serial killer. I think there are at least two serial killers.

This revelation, González Rodríguez says, disconcerted Bolaño. By then, the writer had already devised an elaborate, ingenious structure for his novel, a structure that in some ways depends on the idea of a single serial killer. The innocence or guilt of the real Sharif Sharif wasn't the issue, González Rodríguez says. The problem was how to fit fresh news about the crimes into *2666*.

Bolaño's solution, I suspect, was to adopt many of González Rodríguez's conclusions about Juárez wholesale, then to dramatize these theories in his own way. The parallels between the stories in "The Part About the Crimes" and the conclusions in González Rodríguez's book *Huesos en el desierto*—which isn't available in English—are startling. Yet "nothing," González Rodríguez points out, "is ever followed to the letter." Names are changed, nationalities transformed, characters invented, entire plots embroidered out of imagination, style and air. Bolaño may have used everything González Rodríguez taught him—he read the manuscript for *Huesos* months before it was published—but he refashioned it all to suit his own ends.

The Part About the Goat

After years of correspondence, the two savage detectives finally met in November 2002, when Gonzaléz Rodríguez traveled to Barcelona for the official launch of *Huesos*. Anagrama had bought the book for its prestigious Crónicas imprint, setting it alongside works by Günter Wallraff, Ryszard Kapuscinski and Michael Herr. More than 100 people attended the debut presentation. Months later, the Mexican consulate would decline to send a representative to a theatrical performance inspired by *Huesos*, stating that its officials "don't support works that denigrate Mexico."

Huesos was launched in Spain partly to protect its author. When it was printed, many of the government and police officials fingered by González Rodríguez were still in power, and its account of systematic corruption in Juárez angered those who wanted to portray Mexico as a civilized nation. But press coverage for the book in Europe provided González Rodríguez with a measure of protection against reprisals. After such coverage, there would be no way of making the book or its author quietly disappear when *Huesos* was later released in Mexico.

Bolaño didn't attend the launch, but early the next day González Rodríguez and a friend headed north to the seaside town of Blanes to meet him and his family for lunch. They arrived several hours late. Hung over from the previous night's celebration of dinner and absinthe, González Rodríguez and his friend had boarded the wrong train. Bolaño forgave their late appearance, opening a bottle of wine and offering ham sandwiches. Knowing that Bolaño's illness made it impossible for him to drink liquor, González Rodríguez had brought him a half-kilo of coffee from La Habana, the cafe in Mexico City that Bolaño immortalized in *The Savage Detectives*. Bolaño's liver was so bad that he couldn't drink coffee either, but González Rodríguez recalls that he opened the bag and buried his nose in it.

For the next several hours, they talked about the murders in Juárez. For once, they had no worries about tapped phones or intercepted e-mails. Bolaño could ask all the questions he wanted.

Listen, Bolaño joked, I'm going to make you a character in my novel. I'm going to plagiarize the idea from Javier Marías, who made you a character in *La negra espalda del tiempo*.

González Rodríguez felt his stomach sink. Really, Roberto? he said. With my name?

Yes, don't worry about it, Bolaño said. His daughter, Alejandra, was playing with González Rodríguez's friend. Bolaño looked happy. González Rodríguez didn't know what to say.

The next evening they met for sushi in Barcelona. This time they talked, not about Juárez but about literature. Bolaño asked if writers in Mexico still wore beards or if they'd all cut them off. At one point, he announced that he and Mario Santiago had officially dissolved the Infrarealist movement in Paris in 1992. He's crazy, González Rodríguez thought. He thinks that the only Infrarealists who matter are him and Santiago.

Shortly after this visit, Bolaño published the essay "Sergio González Rodríguez Under the Hurricane," which declared his affection and admiration for the journalist and sang the praises of his book. González Rodríguez's "technical help in the writing of my novel," he wrote, "has been substantial." And *Huesos en el desierto* is "not only an imperfect photograph—how could it be anything else—of evil and of corruption; it also transforms itself into a metaphor of Mexico and of Mexico's past and of the uncertain future of all of Latin America."

Seven months later, on July 1, 2003, Bolaño was admitted to a hospital in Barcelona. Two weeks later, he died.

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When *2666* was released in Mexico in 2004, González Rodríguez could barely bring himself to read it. "It took me months to read the section about the dead women," he says. "It terrified me. To live through it is one thing, but to see it told by a great literary master like Bolaño isn't funny. Roberto is crazier than a goat, you understand? You can't believe it because in some way you're there."

As a reporter, González Rodríguez had cultivated a critical distance that helped him ignore how easily he could be attacked again. Finding in *2666* a character with his name pinioned to a world of killers and cover-ups shattered that illusion. At one point Bolaño even describes a kidnapping exactly like the 1999 attack on González Rodríguez, except that it ends in death. It's not clear whether the reporter who dies is the character "Sergio González."

MARCELA VALDES

Sergio González Rodríguez, 2008

Such pointed mind games aside, any Mexican journalist writing about cartels or corruption would have felt vulnerable in 2004. That year, five investigative reporters were killed or disappeared in Mexico. One of them was shot to death in front of his two young children. According to a report put out by Reporters Without Borders last year, Mexico has become the second-most dangerous place in the world for journalists, the first being Iraq. Alejandro Junco de la Vega, the president of Grupo Reforma, recently told an audience at Columbia University that his three newspapers no longer run bylines, in order to protect their journalists. "We find ourselves under the siege of drug lords, criminals," he explained, "and the more we expose their activities, the harder they push back." Junco himself has moved his entire family to "a safe haven in the US."

So it may be a coincidence that the same year *2666* was published, González Rodríguez decided to stop traveling to Juárez. He'd heard there was a bounty on his head in the state of Chihuahua. Suits alleging slander had been filed, and he risked being jailed the moment he set foot in the state. Given these maneuvers, his lawyers recommended that he not enter Chihuahua under any circumstances. (It wasn't until April 2007 that President Felipe Calderón signed a federal law that decriminalized defamation and "insults," and obliged state governments to do the same.) The last time González Rodríguez visited, nobody wanted to talk about what was going on. It had become a city of closed doors.

Neither *Huesos* nor *2666* is an easy book to read. I was plagued by nightmares as I read both of them. Their pages are like freshly dug graves, but they are shadowed by different philosophies of evil. In *Huesos*, Juárez is a casualty of rampant corruption. When cops and courts look the other way, González Rodríguez believes, brutal acts become ordinary events. The rape and murder of women, the assassination of journalists, the kidnapping of people for ransom: none of these crimes are page-one news in Mexico anymore. "A malevolent person, like a serial killer, can unleash a kind of sweeping effect," González Rodríguez says, igniting a mechanism of extermination that rivals that of any totalitarian dictatorship. This "normalization of barbarism," he argues, is the most serious problem facing Mexico and Latin America today.

In the final section of *2666*, "The Part About Archimboldi," Bolaño presents a more sinister vision of evil. The section opens at the end of World War I, with a wounded Prussian's return home. Everything is changing, a stranger tells him: "The war was coming to an end and a new era was about to begin. [The Prussian] answered, as he ate, that nothing would ever change." Indeed, the whole finale of *2666*, which spans the First World War to the late 1990s, seems designed to prove Archimboldi's belief that history is nothing more than a series of instants "that vie with one another in monstrousness." As Archimboldi fights for the Third Reich on the Eastern Front and starts his career as a novelist in the ruins of Berlin, Bolaño regales us with tale after tale of rape and murder. In the hills of Germany, a man kills his wife and the authorities turn a blind eye. During the war, city folk who flee to the country are routinely robbed, raped and killed. The land around a Romanian castle is filled with buried human bones, and allusions to the Holocaust abound.

In this landscape of brutality and impunity, Santa Teresa seems less aberrant. It's just one of many places where an underlying, pervasive evil has broken the surface. As it is now in Santa Teresa, the novel seems to say, as it has always been, as it shall be in the cemeteries of 2666. Evil is as widespread and eternal as the sea.

This vision of violence brings to mind America's own apocalyptic writer, Cormac McCarthy, but Bolaño's novel has more sex and comedy, and his hero is quite different from those in *The Road* or *Blood Meridian*. Archimboldi marches through the battlefields of Poland and Romania like a man trolling along the bottom of the sea, immersed in the deep's dark horror yet untouched by it. As a teenager, he reads Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* and is captivated by the idea of a "lay and independent" medieval knight. His own holy grail turns out to be a dead man's diary he discovers in an abandoned shtetl.

A lay and independent knight: these words could describe both the great detectives and the great writers who wander through the pages of *2666*. All of them are loners who devote themselves to reading and swimming in the abyss. Being a writer in this world is as dangerous as being a detective, walking through a graveyard, looking at ghosts. ■

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Night Soil

A random walk, its ordinary motion
blurring chronology. Behind, a
seascape. As if on a ship's deck.

Fear of defeat is an old habit. All this fuss, with my
hat pushed back. Honeyed phantastic. En-
raptured soul. Another blow.

From the end of the corridor, at the kitchen
window. These frosts are cruel. I am not
up to them. Out on the balcony, basking.

History is trash. Elaborate battles make
peace and then, after spectacular defeat,
I may go and I may not.

I'm in a bad mood, forever. We bring no
resemblance. Torment and dreams. Grotesque and in-
clement. Always the same amazing luck.

Rest before the fireplace, forget
fine spacing. To control noise by
attacking the odds. Grope for the knob.

Shutting out light and air. Cold stone
floor. Sinking. Devouring
pit. Dissolve, now, the dungeon.

Streaks of light stream from your
shadow. Redisposed. Clouds are not
simply carried. We observe words and winds.

The door slams behind us. Not so much
forced by the sun as simply
coasting under our own inertia.

The knives of reality. Repeat the names.
Doves, when they fight. Scorn is best and
yes, we may go and we may not.

KEITH WALDROP

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Stewartsville

by CHRISTINE SMALLWOOD

In 1948, the year that Norman Mailer published *The Naked and the Dead* and Dawn Powell released *The Locusts Have No King*, an English professor at the University of California named George Rippey Stewart published a novel called *Fire*. The story of an imaginary blaze's path of destruction through Northern California and the men who coordinate an attack to put it out, it closely reworked a book he had written seven years earlier, *Storm*. It's not much of a fire—"any old-timer could recall a score of greater ones, and would only expect that the years to come would bring many more"—yet the charred trees, imagined as victims of a plague that spared adults and killed all the children, will have consequences for the land that "could be reckoned ahead in centuries."

Fire was a bestseller and a Book-of-the-Month Club selection. Its popularity is easy to understand—in many ways it's a potboiler, fast and dirty, with staccato dialogue and plenty of sweat and grime. Yet it contains passages of strange poetry, like this:

> Humbug Point saw the blow-up, and Lovers Leap. Horse Mountain reported, and signed off, quoting *Joel 2:30*—"and in the earth, blood, and fire, and pillars of smoke." Far to the north, Sheer Rock saw it suddenly above the high shoulder of Howell Mountain. Hamlin Point saw it build up above the round top of Cerro Gordo, like the towering smoke of a new-born volcano.

Within a few short paragraphs, the Book of Joel is a distant memory: "'Good God!' he was thinking, 'that whole Ponderosa country is a tinder-box today. We've got to hit that fire with everything we can throw at it—and quick!'"

Stewart's lyricism is fashioned from two materials: Old Testament fire and brimstone—a pervasive climate of environmental tempests and spiritual tests—and the incantations of names. The latter found their fullest expression in his most famous work, *Names on the Land*. Released three years before *Fire*, the book is a history of American place-names that retraces the paths of conquistadors, pilgrims, frontiersmen and merchants across the Lower 48. (A reissue added chapters on Alaska and Hawaii.) A ramble through the book's index reveals the land's rhythms and curiosities: Puget Sound, Pulaski, Pumly Tar, Punxsutawney, Purgatoire, Putah Creek, Putin, Puu. Toby's Creek, Todd's Corner, Togo, Tokio, Tokio River, Toledo, Tolo, Tolono, Tolstoi, Tomato Creek, Tomball, Tombstone. Bird-in-Hand, Deal, Fertility, Intercourse. Stewart was a poet, but he was a tough guy, too, like Mailer. Unlike Mailer, though, who fueled his machismo with flights of scotch, Stewart was a rugged survivalist, a social conservative who measured testosterone in miles hiked.

Names on the Land
A Historical Account of Place-Naming in the United States.
By George R. Stewart.
New York Review Books. 511 pp.
Paper $19.95.

The author of twenty-eight books of history and fiction, Stewart has largely been forgotten. Unlike literary novelists, who self-consciously transcend the conventions of genre and reach a national or international audience, Stewart was a distinctly regional writer, specializing in the West generally and California specifically. But region was his strength, not his burden, and it's the foundation of the genre he popularized: the environmental thriller, a carefully researched destruction story full of local color and organized around plagues, hurricanes, fires or subzero temperatures. Stewart is best known for four books in this vein: *Fire*, *Storm*, *Ordeal by Hunger* (1936), a history of the Donner Party, and the fantasy classic *Earth Abides* (1949), the first American postapocalyptic thriller. Man versus nature, and the ability of humans to cope under environmental stress, are Stewart's two obsessions and the genre's enduring conventions. (It doesn't spoil the books to know that in this epic battle, man has a tendency to come out the loser.) The engineering of civilization—the maintenance of roadways, the running of telephone lines, the preservation of written knowledge—is of secondary interest to Stewart. He is at once a chronicler of the achievements and architectures of modern civilization and an ecological fatalist. The glories of men come and go, but the mountains last forever.

"A name could only live in continuing tradition, and a mere notation upon a map or in a journal—no matter how high-sounding—was only a hope of the man who wrote it," Stewart notes early in *Names*. Unlike nature, which is indifferent to man, names must be uttered and shared to stay alive. This summer, New York Review Books rekindled this sentiment by reissuing *Names on the Land*, one of four books on place-names by Stewart, a founding member of the American Name Society; the others are *A Concise Dictionary of American Place-Names* (1970), *Names on the Globe* (1975) and *American Given Names* (1979), which appeared a year before he died. Published in 1945, and revised and reissued in 1958 and 1967, *Names on the Land* is considered the best of the quartet. It is an astonishing book, a sort of anecdotal encyclopedia that fairly explodes with facts of American life culled from WPA guides, state-name books, early directories, linguistic histories, explorer journals, news accounts and local histories. Stewart describes explorations, explains the etymologies of common place-name parts like "brook" or "ville" and provides a general sense of what certain categories of names indicate. Animal names, for instance, often arose from one memorable encounter (Wolf Meadow); plant names tend to commemorate an unusual growth, since a name like Pine Creek would only cause confusion in a region with an abundance of pines. ("Such names rarely sprang from incidents," he writes, "because a man does not often have an adventure with a tree.") *Names* celebrates the innovations of America and cheerleads for democracy, but ultimately it's no WPA celebration of Americana. It charts the landmass like a verbal atlas. Stewart's most cerebral environmental thriller, it preserves the distance between Americans and the land they took. The names are "on" the land, not "of" it.

A few years after *Names* appeared, Stewart took the thriller genre into fresh territory. In 1949 the University of California Regents imposed a requirement that all university employees sign an oath denying membership in the Communist Party. The Berkeley campus erupted in protest over the oath, which was widely seen as a violation of academic freedom and an instrument designed to stir up a climate of fear and recrimination. The next year Stewart fired off a short history of the crisis called *The Year of the Oath*. We could call it a regional campus thriller, populated with "bare-handed men going in to fight against the men who held the guns," where you might find yourself with a "knife at the throat—fighting on the edge of a precipice." A narrative history, written in the first-person plural, the book

Christine Smallwood, a writer in New York, is former associate literary editor of The Nation.

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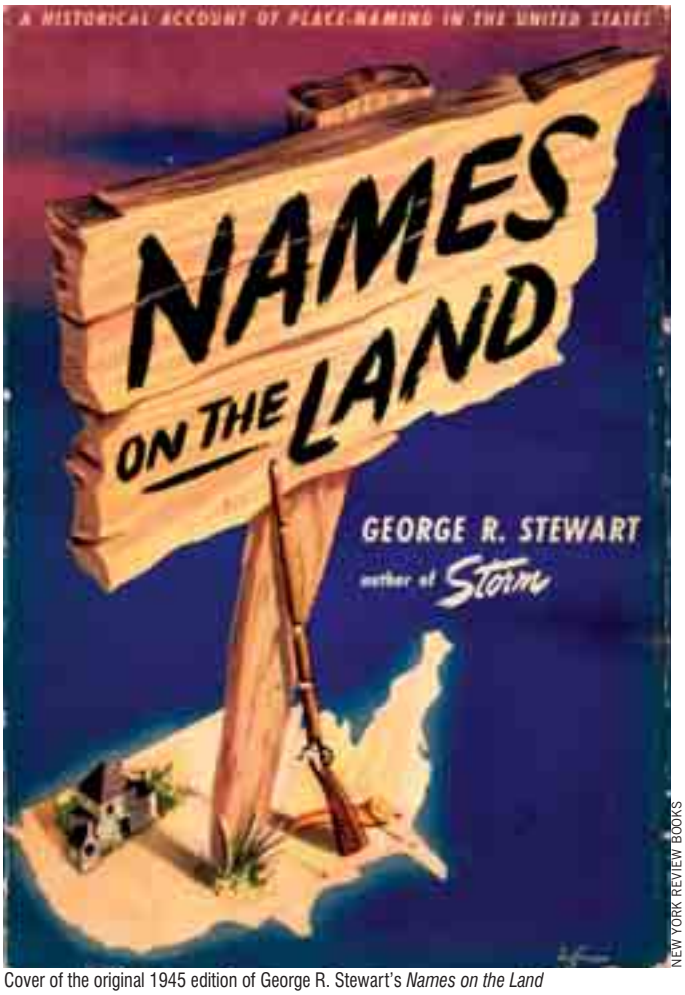
tracks all the important meetings of the year and tries to reconstruct the moves of all the players—the Board of Regents, the university president, the various faculty factions. He imagines the professors as a tribe, the heirs to the Costanoans, who once lived on the site of the Berkeley faculty club, which he compares to the sweat house, where the Costanoans met to devise a plan for dealing with the Spaniards—the colonial version of the Board of Regents. The oath was extremely unpopular, but only 20 percent of the faculty refused to sign outright. Though *The Year of the Oath* is a defense of academic freedom and is often held up as a precursor to the Berkeley Free Speech Movement of the 1960s, its author sided with the majority. Stewart signed the oath—and according to Bob Blauner, a retired Berkeley sociologist who is writing a book about the controversy, "right away."


A HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF PLACE-NAMING IN THE UNITED STATES
NAMES ON THE LAND
GEORGE R. STEWART
author of Storm
NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS
Cover of the original 1945 edition of George R. Stewart's *Names on the Land*

It's very much like Stewart to sign the oath and then write a book against it. He was a fierce individualist, American in a typical live-and-let-live way, but not one to risk it all on a gamble or garner undue attention for himself. Born in Sewickley, Pennsylvania, in 1895, he was the son of an engineer who worked on the railways around Pittsburgh. Raised in a Scottish Presbyterian home, Stewart used his writing to try to reconcile science and religion by refashioning his family's Old Testament faith into a kind of ecological spiritualism, in which divinity is manifested in an all-powerful nature that humans can never hope to master. They can, though—and this is crucial for Stewart—accept their subordination and learn to live in harmony with the earth. When he was 12 his family moved to Azusa, California, and later he returned east for his education; he graduated from Princeton in 1917 and briefly returned to the West Coast to do an MA at Berkeley, then headed back east to do doctoral work in English literature at Columbia, which awarded him a PhD in 1922. While he was teaching at the University of Michigan the next year, he fell in love with Theodosia Burton, the university president's daughter. Henry Ford was a guest at their wedding. In 1923 Berkeley offered Stewart a job, and he and Theodosia headed west, the first of the cross-country trips that inspired his road book, *U.S. 40*.

When Stewart was a senior in high school, he was asked to write a poem for a class assignment. He wasn't fond of school, and he wasn't particularly friendly. He wrote a poem about the hero of a football game. His teacher liked it, and he was asked to read it in front of the whole school of 1,500 students. He was met with an uproar of applause and was, he later said, "a marked man forever after." This was quite a reception for someone who was more likely to be swept away by feeling the touch of something ancient during an epic hike, and whose first intense literary experience as a boy was reading a copy of *Treasure Island* he found in the attic. Later, he discovered that Stevenson based his setting on two California landscapes, including an abandoned mine in Napa Valley called Silverado.

Don Scott, who is writing a biography of Stewart, thinks these episodes dramatize Stewart's life and work: the scholarly solitude of research, the sublime, quasi-religious encounter with nature and the joy of writing for a popular audience. (Scott read *Earth Abides* at age 12 and credits Stewart with his decision to become a park ranger. The two met one day when Stewart came to Scott's post to sign a visitor pass.) These strands come together in *Ordeal by Hunger*, a definitive account of the eighty-seven emigrants who found themselves stranded in the winter of 1846–47 in the Sierra Mountains during their journey from Illinois to California, half of whom arrived in one piece. Drawing on methodical research into diaries, histories, maps and news stories, Stewart tells a cool, dispassionate and yet compassionate tale of the trial faced by people unprepared for the elements. The members of the Donner Party make a fateful error when they follow the advice of an adventurer named Lansford Hastings; instead of following the Oregon route, they take a "shortcut" and head south of the Great Salt Lake and across the mountains. And thus "the trap clicks behind," Stewart writes—or does it?

Stewart loves the high-toned language of Old Testament calamity, but he also savors the drama of a good cliffhanger. *Ordeal* shoots the moon with a weird blend of inevitability, suspense and sudden contradiction. "So again Reed rode away from the adobe walls of Sutter's Fort, this time heading south and west and soon leaving out of sight the baffling wall of mountains which might hide behind its imperturbable white expanse he knew not what horrors." So ends one chapter. The next begins: "Actually that white wall hid as yet no horrors. If Reed instead of riding southward could have lifted himself to overlook the pass above the mountain lake, he would have seen the smokes of three cabins. The snow-trapped emigrants with the adaptability and hardihood of their pioneer blood had already established themselves." It's vintage Stewart: the romanticization of the pioneer spirit, the bird's-eye perspective, the jamboree of disaster melodrama, Technicolor adventure and smoking chimneys on the frontier. A few chapters later we plunge back into the horrors, as the starving Mary Graves and William Eddy, having been reduced to eating boots and shoes, manage to kill a deer: "Then he and Mary falling together upon their quarry drank the warm blood as it flowed…their faces covered with blood." We know what *other* kind of blood is looming and—well, the foreshadowing is not subtle, but it gets the job done.

Ordeal by Hunger is a remarkable book. It's gripping and horrifying in spasms, but the bulk of it is unsensational, even dry—

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quite a feat for a story better known for people eating people. Plumbing the interior lives of characters is not Stewart's strength, although he does succeed in drawing a few thumbnail sketches of pioneers on the California Trail. Instead, he focuses on the dynamics of the Donner Party and the fate of the human organism: how it frays and tears and ultimately turns on itself. He's more interested in nature than humans, and in human groups more than individual psychologies. In *Storm*, he went so far as to write what he called a biography of the weather; indeed, nearly all the humans are known by their job titles—the Superintendent, the Chief Service Officer—while the storm gets a name, Maria.

For Stewart, humans are exiles on earth: one day, inevitably, pitiless nature will bring us to our knees.

In contemporary accounts of the environment and global warming, a benign earth is populated by harmful humans—flawed creatures with a talent for mucking up the planet and making it uninhabitable. But in Stewart's work, the natural world is insensitive. The earth is in some fundamental way already uninhabitable, and humans are exiles in it. The social and the ecological can come into balance, but it's an uneasy truce. It's not just that man can't ever dominate nature. It's that one day, inevitably, a pitiless nature will bring him to his knees. In *Ordeal by Hunger*, freezing temperatures, howling winds and brutal snowdrifts lead to desperation. The pioneers were adaptable, but as Stewart repeatedly reminds the reader, they were also Midwestern plainsmen, novice mountaineers whose naïve mistakes cost them precious time and who perished for lack of knowing how to properly pack oxen or fashion snowshoes. Several years later, in *Earth Abides*, the exiles are humans who survive a plague and must remake society. The critical question is whether the "tribe" can plan practically and improvise in a crisis—and whether they have the will to cling to life by their fingernails. Stewart reveres people who labor with dignity and their hands, and he sneers at "the kind of man who naturally prospers in civilization"—the self-promoter, the salesman. Of Hastings, he writes, "the mountains and the desert are indifferent to even the cleverest talker…they possess what might be called a notably high sales-resistance." The overwhelming impression created by reading *Ordeal by Hunger* and *Earth Abides* in succession is that one has a better chance of surviving a global plague that has wiped out almost all of humanity than going west in 1846 too late in the season.

In the preface to the 1957 edition of *Names on the Land*, Stewart wrote that the book was his favorite, for two reasons. First and foremost, he was "born with a love of names," which I take to mean both an innate love of their poetry and a fascination with their history. Second, and perhaps more critical to understanding his project, he favored *Names* because "I feel that in spite of the difficulties I finally came closer to attaining what I set out to do than with any other of my books."

Each of Stewarts's thrillers is a microhistory of a whole world at work. *Names* is a bigger, bolder book because it has a much grander scope—not just the physical expanse of the American land but the whole vista of American migration. Reading *Names* today, when hardly any corner of the United States remains to be developed, much less explored, is a journey back to a time when "perhaps the streams still ran high from the melting ice-cap, and strange beasts roamed the forest"—strange beasts *here*, where the subdivisions sprawl and skyscrapers sway. With the constant chatter about which of our politicians loves America the most, or how we are all one America, or two Americas, or a variously colored jigsaw America, "America" has long since become a sound bite, a talking point. To the question What is America?, *Names* answers, Not the leader of the free world and not the scourge of the world but a history of settlement.

The thrill of *Names* is not of destruction but discovery. There's not one overarching suspense plot. Instead there are a million civic minidramas—will the townspeople succeed in changing the name of Mount Rainier to Mount Tacoma?—and the satisfaction of coming to understand the patterns and habits of naming on a national scale. *Names* chronicles the human history that *Earth Abides* demolishes. The conventions are still man versus nature and people under stress, but the stakes are greater than the life or death of any one individual. They're the fate of maps and return addresses, of highway exit markers and, ultimately, cultural memory. Every place-name we know was given by someone to commemorate something. *Names* is the work of an ace detective.

The novelist Russell Banks recently scrutinized the shaping of the country in *Dreaming Up America*, a chatty essay drawn from remarks he made during an appearance on French television about prominent American myths. In the book's first section Banks discusses the three mythological locales that drew Europeans to the continent: El Dorado, the City of Gold, pursued by Cortés and Pizarro; the Fountain of Youth, dreamed of by Ponce de León; and the City on the Hill, the Puritans' New Jerusalem. Banks's conceit is a useful key to *Names on the Land* because the place-names that Stewart maps reflect these dreams—to get rich, to rejuvenate oneself, to practice one's religion freely—as well as their migration across the continent, from Mount Sinai westward to Gold Hill. Stewart begins the book with a Genesis-style invocation:

> Once, from eastern ocean to western ocean, the land stretched away without names. Nameless headlands split the surf; nameless lakes reflected nameless mountains; and nameless rivers flowed through nameless valleys into nameless bays.

Tribe gave way to tribe until "a people calling themselves Americans held the land." (Here the word "held" masks the brutal suppression of Native Americans, though at other moments Stewart turns his attention to their plight.) But when "the names lay thickly over the land," Stewart continues,

> the Americans spoke them, great and little, easily and carelessly—Virginia, Susquehanna, Rio Grande, Deadman Creek, Sugar-Loaf Hill, Detroit, Wall Street—not thinking how they had come to be. Yet the names had grown out of the life, and the life-blood, of all who had come before. From the names might be known how here one man hoped and struggled, how there another dreamed, or died, or sought fortune, and another joked, twisting an old name to make a new one—Providence and Battle Mountain, Hardscrabble, Troy, Smackover, Maine, Elrio, Pasadena, Troublesome Creek, Cape Fear, Nashville, Lincoln County, Fourth Crossing.

A variety of factors make it hard to piece together the "one man" here and the "one man" there into a definitive picture. *Names* is light on plot and heavy on data, organized chronologically into chapters like "How the Names Became More English and Less English" and "Melodrama in the Forties." Stewart is just as interested in the names that didn't survive as he is in those that did: it is the process of naming that intrigues him and

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that he charts in exhaustive detail. How did Pennsylvania come to be named after the modest William Penn, who loathed self-aggrandizement and preferred the more anonymous "Sylvania"? Why was it that "Philosophy River degenerated into still another Willow Creek; Wisdom, into Big Hole River"? How did Minnehaha Falls (the Sioux means "water-waterfalls"), called Laughing Water, become Minnehapolis and then Minneapolis? The image of the land that emerges over 500 pages in *Names* is like a Chuck Close painting—swatches of information coalesce into a montage of a face we know.

Names tell stories, and they speak loudest of the namers. American toponymy is a history of ignorance, ingenuity and sensibility. (The one place Americans haven't found inspiration for place-names is literature—"Americans either did not read much or were not much influenced by what they read.") The names evolve as the needs and fashions of the namers change: early names are descriptive (the Blue Ridge Mountains), or they pay homage to European towns (Plymouth). They honor saints and, later, war heroes, frontiersmen and local big men and their families. The relationship between the white settlers and the Indian names is particularly vexed: often the Indian names were kept, then abandoned and then, in the mid-nineteenth-century passion for all things exotic, restored. Most Indian names that remain are not indigenous—and there are a lot of them. (If there was one thing Americans liked more than getting rid of the Indians, it was naming things after them, like Indiana.) The names tell jokes and note insults; they go west, reminding settlers of eastern homes. They lie and record battles, and they are always political: as Stewart tells us, where Indians killed whites, it was a massacre; where whites killed Indians, it was a battle. They issue warnings: according to Stewart, no one is known to have died at a Lovers' Leap, though someone might. And sometimes they keep their secrets.

Given the twisty back roads on which names travel, it's a wonder that any have survived at all. Stewart is particularly good on the humor of translation. He cites three ways a name can pass from one language to another. A name can be listened to and written down phonetically—which, given that spelling in the colonial period was hardly codified, opens another trapdoor. A name may be listened to and then half translated into English, as in "Westkeag" or "Longacoming" and "'Scape-Whore." Finally, a name might be translated into English. One name in Pennsylvania took all three routes. "The Indian word itself survived in Chindeclamoose Run; by clipping and folk-etymology it became Moose Creek; and in translation, Clearfield." Along the Arkansas River, "L'eau Froide, 'cold water,' became Low Freight, and Chemin Couvert, 'covered road,' became Smackover." Stewart treasures these accidents of language: "With such names folk-etymology became veritable poetry. They might well be declared national property, to be preserved like peaks and waterfalls for the perpetual delight of all lovers of names."

The names won't abide. But while we have them, they are beautiful to read—and even more to hear.

Stewart occasionally asks the names to do too much. He writes that "the evidence of the names indicates that the American people have always held Union most dear. Liberty has been a bad second; Freedom and Independence have trailed far behind." But the fact that his survey of place-names turned up 110 Unions, forty-four Liberties and fourteen Freedoms doesn't suggest anything about the number of people who hold any of these principles dear; it suggests which people held them dear. I find it hard to believe that in the post–Civil War era, emancipated slaves prized freedom and liberty less than union. I do believe, however, that they were not frequently asked to record their preferences for posterity.

In 1972 an interview with Stewart was published by Berkeley's Regional Oral History Office. At the beginning of the conversation, the interviewer remarks, "You are so understanding of yourself and your family, and yet you seem to want to get on to talking about places and away from people pretty quickly." Stewart replied: "There are certain things I shied away from, though, I think, certain kinds of emotional involvements. I think it's all right.... That Presbyterian-Scottish background is strongly disciplined, somewhat repressed, and I think that's what you are seeing."

Stewart was certainly buttoned up, but he wasn't above a quiet joke now and again. Sly references tie together his books for the close reader. "There ought to be a law against books about the Donner Party," the Superintendent thinks in *Storm*. And naming recurs as a theme. "Although they figure little in the story," he says of minor characters in *Ordeal*, "they should be recorded, if for nothing else, merely for their fine old English names." In *Earth Abides*, the protagonist, Ish, directs two young men of the new tribe as they set out to explore the continent. Recalling names like Bakersfield, Route 466 and Tehachapi Pass brings tears to his eyes. "The names, it *must* have been, that did it! Burbank, Hollywood, Pasadena—once they had been living towns. He had known them. Now coyotes hunted jack-rabbits through their drought-stricken parks and back lots. Yet all the names still stood out black and plain on the maps." He gives them directions, and one boy interrupts: "What's Arry—? What is it?—Arry-*zone*-a?" The question stumps Ish: "What Arizona once had been—even that was a hard one."

The most important characteristic of a name might be the one least suited to a toponymic encyclopedia: its sound. A really musical name will upend the language, make it sound utterly strange and new. It will reduce—or exalt—the name's meaning, melding sound and sense in sheer musicality. What makes American English sing? Aesthetic formulas are out of fashion, but Americans seem to fancy long vowels that extend the length of a word, like Dakota, Mississippi, Ohio, Topeka and Reno. One syllable or two are satisfactory, but we seem to prefer three or four—the better to croon, preach or stump with. The sound of America is the sound of Wyoming, Arizona, Yosemite. It's the sound of Poughkeepsie, Minnesota, Lincoln and Washington. Cuyamaca, Daufuskie, Allegheny. Sassagoula, Washoe and Stinking-water.

The names won't abide. The maps might last a while longer, but with no one to read, much less care, for them, they too will disintegrate. Territories are seized and ceded, Indian to white man, tribe to tribe, and names are preserved, revamped or vanish; in the end, the land, with it storms and fires and blizzards and plagues, will outlast the names and all their namers and namesakes. But for the moment, while we have them, the names are beautiful to read and even more beautiful to hear. A good name tingles when it rolls off the tongue and reinvigorates the language each time it is spoken, a reminder of all that words can do. A great name is poetry, and through its poetry it embodies memories and smells, vistas attained and journeys never taken, and conjures, briefly, lives long since passed. In *Names on the Land*, Stewart explores it all with unflagging curiosity. He passed the same signs a million other people did, but he pulled over to find out where they came from. ■

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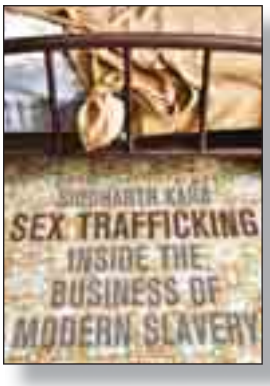

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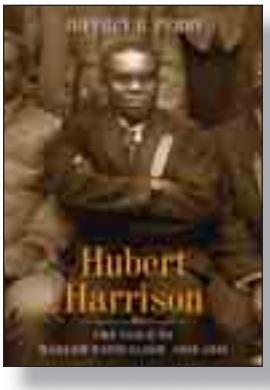

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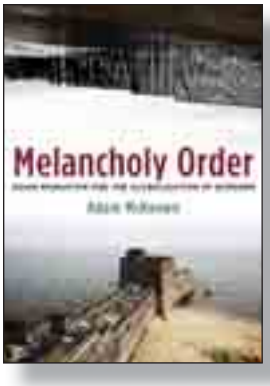

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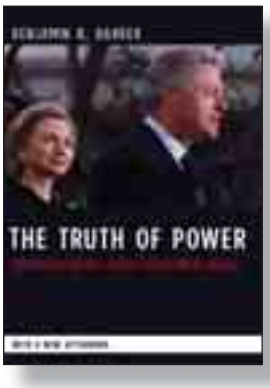

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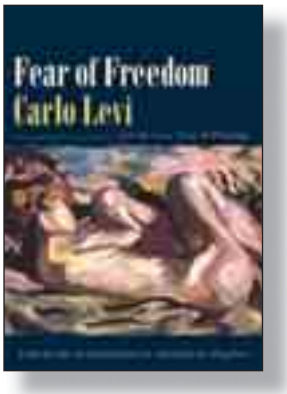

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V.S. Naipaul in Oklahoma

Naipaul's Darkness

by SCOTT SHERMAN

The World Is What It Is
The Authorized Biography of V.S. Naipaul.
By Patrick French.
Knopf. 554 pp. $30.

In 1998, a young English journalist named Patrick French arrived in India on assignment for *The New Yorker*. One day in Delhi, a well-connected friend offered to drive French to a press conference, and he found himself in a car with V.S. Naipaul and his wife. Naipaul "was wearing many layers of clothing and a tweed jacket, despite the heat," French recalls. "He held a trilby hat carefully in his lap. A roll-neck sweater merged with his beard, completing the impression that he was fully covered." Mrs. Naipaul inquired about the *New Yorker* article, and French replied that he was having some difficulty with the magazine's fact-checkers. "Don't let *The New Yorker* worry you," Naipaul sniffed. "*The New Yorker* knows nothing about writing. Nothing. Writing an article there is like posting a letter in a Venezuelan postbox; nobody will read it."

Three years later, French was invited to undertake a project as grueling as writing scores of *New Yorker* articles: an authorized biography of V.S. Naipaul. (French has not elaborated on the circumstances that led to the invitation.) At first, French hesitated; the scope and complexity of the project seemed daunting. Naipaul, after all, has written twenty-nine books, which include novels, linked stories, travel writing (three books on India among them), history, literary criticism, reportage and genre-defying masterpieces that delicately fuse autobiography and fiction.

Moreover, French would have to confront the least radiant and most cynical of contemporary writers. In "Conrad's Darkness," a superb essay he wrote in 1974, Naipaul defined his preoccupations: "the curious reliance of men on institutions they were yet working to undermine, the simplicity of beliefs and the hideous simplicity of actions, the corruption of causes, half-made societies that seemed doomed to remain half-made." Declarations of this sort, combined with Naipaul's abrasive views on India and the developing world, have made many critics in left-liberal circles clench their teeth. Derek Walcott, an old sparring partner, once dubbed him V.S. Nightfall. "Naipaul is saying what the whites want to say but dare not," C.L.R. James remarked. "They have put him up to it." Edward Said called him "a kind of belated Kipling [who] carries with him a kind of half-stated but finally unexamined reverence for the colonial order."

Certain literary soothsayers insist that left-of-center writers have a natural advantage in the nomination process for the Nobel Prize in Literature. In 2001 the Swedish Academy proved them wrong by selecting Naipaul. The citation praised him as "Conrad's heir" and "a literary circumnavigator, only ever really at home in himself, in his inimitable voice," and celebrated him as a writer who is "singularly unaffected by literary fashion." Indeed, French reports that Naipaul was "initially unwilling to take the call from Stockholm, since he was cleaning his teeth." Like other great writers—Norman Mailer, Gore Vidal and Doris Lessing spring to mind—Naipaul has endeavored to be outrageous and provocative, if not scabrous. French noticed that "creating tension, insulting his friends, family or whole communities left him in excellent spirits." In 1989, when the Iranian government issued a fatwa against Salman Rushdie, Naipaul laconically announced, "It's an extreme form of literary criticism."

For Naipaul and his handlers, French was a shrewd and honest choice: a writer not given to extremes. A regular contributor to British newspapers and Indian newsmagazines, and the author of several books (a biography of the British colonial explorer Sir Francis Edward Younghusband, a literary travelogue about Tibet, a history of the Indian independence movement), French is a graceful, confident and subtle writer. Still, before agreeing to the task, he presented Naipaul with two ironclad conditions: a series of candid face-to-face interviews and unrestricted access to his archive at the University of Tulsa, which contains more than 50,000 items, including the diaries of his first wife, Patricia Hale. Naipaul responded with silence; months passed. Eventually, French received a letter of acceptance, "written as if unwillingly in a fast, cramped hand, in violet ink." Over the years many readers have been drawn to the evocative title Naipaul selected for a novel he published in 1987, *The Enigma of Arrival* (a 1912 painting by Giorgio de Chirico inspired its title). *The World Is What It Is*, the product of years of toil, offers a vivid, and sometimes enthralling, portrait of a deeply enigmatic writer.

Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul was born in Trinidad in 1932. At the time the country had a population of 400,000, one-third of whom were Indians employed as clerks, agricultural workers, spirit vendors, merchants and small-time shopkeepers. Naipaul's family had joined those ranks in the late nineteenth century, when his mother's father migrated to the island as an indentured laborer. Naipaul spent his earliest years in the small country town of Chaguanas, in the house of his im-

Scott Sherman is a contributing writer of The Nation.

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posing and imperious grandmother, whose business acumen in real estate enabled her to rise. Built in "the North Indian style," the house, as Naipaul explained in 1983 in his "Prologue to an Autobiography," "had balustraded roof terraces, and the main terrace was decorated at either end with a statue of a rampant lion." It was crowded. Naipaul's mother had eight sisters, and each resided at Lion House with her husband and children, one family per room. Hindi was spoken, and vegetarian food was prepared communally in "a dingy, blackened kitchen." The men usually wore shirts made from flour sacks.

Lion House simmered with intrigue and tension, and occasionally boiled over into violence, a situation rendered with exquisite sadness and comedy in Naipaul's breakthrough novel, *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961). "The family was a totalitarian organization," Naipaul wrote in the "Prologue." Decisions "were taken by a closed circle at the top—my grandmother and her two eldest sons-in-law." (The remaining sons-in-law toiled in virtual serfdom, forced to work on the family property but denied their own spending money; they drowned in bitterness.) It was an arrangement that Naipaul's father, Seepersad—who, in his son's words, "dangled all his life in a half-dependence and half-esteem" between two groups of powerful relatives—found suffocating. "What happens in that kind of awful set-up," Naipaul informed French, "is that lots of quarrels break out between people, and those quarrels were my training for life, my training in life and society—propaganda, alliances, betrayals—all these things. So, in a way, nothing that happened later ever really shocked me."

The young Naipaul—French refers to him as Vidia—was a gloomy and morose child. He refused to participate in religious thread ceremonies organized by his grandmother; he complained about the food; and he groused about the fumes from the kerosene stove, which aggravated his asthma. He excelled at Queen's Royal College (the same school C.L.R. James attended), and he was one of four students from Trinidad to win a full scholarship to study in England; he chose Oxford University. According to French, Naipaul was admitted by Peter Bayley, a Fellow of English at University College, who many years later recalled, "because I loved India and had many Indian friends, because of being there for nearly four years in the war, I just didn't hesitate, just took him."

Naipaul went to Oxford in 1950. He worked hard, in his literature classes especially: "I want to come top of my group," he wrote to his parents. "I have got to show these people that I can beat them at their own language." It was Seepersad who, in a powerful and lasting way, instilled the literary vocation in his son. Seepersad read Dickens, O. Henry, Somerset Maugham, J.R. Ackerley and R.K. Narayan, and he wrote fiction himself, in bed with a pencil. Since 1929 Seepersad had been a reporter for the *Trinidad Guardian*, a stodgy paper then being revitalized by an energetic editor from London, who brought a Fleet Street sensibility and "a tourist's eye" to Trinidad's local excitements—"French fugitives from Devil's Island, voodoo in negro backyards, Indian obeah, Venezuelan vampire bats," in V.S. Naipaul's words.

At Oxford Naipaul received a steady stream of letters from his "Pa," which contained snapshots of his life at the newspaper ("The *Guardian* is taking all out of me—writing tosh. What price salted fish and things of that sort. Actually that is my assignment for tomorrow! It hurts"); inquiries for minutiae about the social and intellectual life at Oxford ("write me weekly of the men you meet; tell me what you talked; how they talked"); requests for books; and advice on writing ("Read Conrad for intensity of expression, but for the most part be yourself"). In late

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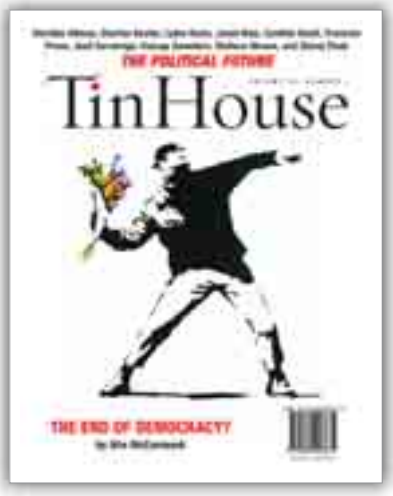

Two decades ago, Francis Fukuyama proclaimed the triumph of liberal democratic capitalism in "The End of History?" Now, in the first political issue of renowned literary journal *Tin House*, editor in chief Win McCormack wonders whether liberal democracy can survive at all. Slavoj Žizek, Markos Moulitsas, Cynthia Ozick, Thomas Frank, and Eduardo Galeano weigh in on related subjects.

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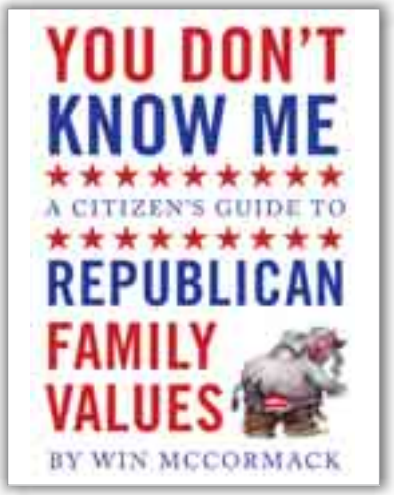

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1953 Naipaul received word that heart disease had killed his father at 47, and he dispatched a telegram to Trinidad: "He Was the Best Man I Knew Stop Everything I Owe to Him Be Brave My Loves Trust Me—Vido."

With his father gone and his prospects in London few, Naipaul, having taken his degree, nearly unraveled. "Our family was in distress," he recalled in the "Prologue," referring to his mother and younger siblings, who were in urgent need of money. "I should have done something for them, gone back to them. I couldn't go back." Trinidad, he had written to his mother, was too small ("40 X 40 miles"), the values "are all wrong, and the people are petty." He wouldn't even return for a visit until he had achieved some notoriety in Britain. Naipaul's mental condition was uncertain: he had suffered a nervous breakdown at Oxford, what he called "a great depression verging on madness." His destination was not Trinidad but Grub Street, and French provides a rich account of Naipaul's first year in London: he lived in a rat-infested basement and was rebuffed by numerous employers. When his girlfriend, Patricia Hale, suggested he look for a clerical position, he responded with a smoldering letter: "The people in authority feel my qualifications fit me only for jobs as porters in kitchens, and with the road gangs. My physique decrees otherwise." That morose child in Trinidad was now a penurious drifter in London: "No fire in my room for two days and only tea & toast in my stomach. That is what the whole policy of the Free World amounts to. Naipaul, poor wog, literally starving, and very cold." In December 1954 the BBC Caribbean Service offered him a position in London; decades later he admitted to an interviewer, "That saved my life, really."

In *The Middle Passage*, Naipaul's melancholy and sarcasm unleash lashes of mockery and derision.

Pat, whom Naipaul married in 1955, implored him to write. "Leisure kills a writer unless he's about sixty and has led a very active life," she told him in a letter. So at age 22, on an old BBC typewriter and on smooth "non-rustle" BBC script paper, he typed out the first sentence of *Miguel Street*: "Every morning when he got up Hat would sit on the banister of his back verandah and shout across, 'What happening there, Bogart?'" The book, a collection of wry, melancholy stories written from a child's perspective, chronicled the denizens, drifters and dreamers Naipaul had known in the streets of Port of Spain, the city to which the Naipaul family had relocated in 1938. Most of his subjects were Indians. We encounter, among others, a man whose wife runs off, after which he converts his house into a brothel for American sailors, and a boy who dreams of becoming a doctor but ends up carting trash on the streets. Naipaul returned to Trinidad in 1956 and found himself face to face with the man on whom he modeled Hat, the griot of *Miguel Street* and a central character in the book. "He really is a surly man," Naipaul wrote to Pat. "We never were really friends. He only knew me as the bright boy in the street. Yet he gave me a choice mango the other day. He told my mother, 'I have a mango for Vido.' And when he saw me he just gave me the mango."

At the time Trinidad was hurtling toward independence, and French skillfully evokes the atmosphere of political turmoil and transition there. Hindu politicians were reeling from the creation of a largely black political party led by Dr. Eric Williams, author of *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944). Naipaul's uncle Simbhoo was running for office, and one of his rallies ended in a riot involving bottles and knives. When Williams's party won at the polls, Naipaul shared his reactions with Pat in language he knew would inflame her liberal sensibilities: "With the present government of noble niggers, all sorts of racialist laws might be passed.... Indians are talking of leaving, so are the Chinese." (Naipaul would always be concerned about the safety of the Indian diaspora.) But the election gave him fresh material for a novel, *The Suffrage of Elvira*, a sly comedy about electoral machinations in provincial Trinidad. By the time it was published in 1958—to glowing reviews from Anthony Powell and Kingsley Amis—Naipaul had returned to London. He had left the BBC and was reviewing books for *The New Statesman* while formulating the novel that would become *Biswas*.

Serious writers require patrons, and in 1960 Naipaul found an unlikely one: Eric Williams, who was keen to lure gifted expatriates back to the island with open-ended fellowships. Williams wanted Naipaul, whose writing he admired, to produce a nonfiction book on the Caribbean. Naipaul accepted the fellowship, and he and Pat returned to Trinidad, where they lived on a stipend provided by Williams. They traveled to British Guiana, Jamaica, Suriname and Martinique at his expense. Williams even arranged to have his government purchase 2,000 copies of what became *The Middle Passage*. Naipaul launched his career as a travel writer by accepting handouts from what he had branded a "government of noble niggers."

Like much of the nonfiction that would eventually flow from Naipaul's pen, *The Middle Passage* is an engaging and disconcerting work. It contains incisive reporting and observation; lofty, provocative historical analysis; melancholy rumination ("Carnival in Trinidad has always depressed me"); gallows humor; lean, economical, elegant prose; and a pessimistic and sarcastic authorial perspective given to lashes of mockery and derision ("the malarial sluggishness of the Guianese is known throughout the Caribbean"). Underneath it all, a restless intelligence was at work. When setting foot in a country, Naipaul endeavored to measure its amnesia about the past, its ability to repair itself in the present and its economic prospects for the future. In his chapter on Martinique, he observed:

> [It] produces nothing apart from sugar, rum and bananas. Couldn't they even make their own coconut oil for the margarine factory that employs seven people? Surely coconuts can grow in Martinique? "Impossible," says one. "The man is mad. Pay no attention," says another. And so the bickering goes on and coconut oil is imported, and milk is flown in from France...by the Air France milk plane. And because Martinique is part of France, her unique rum cannot be exported direct to North or South America, but must first cross the Atlantic to Paris and be redirected from there, enriching middlemen all the way.

By and large, reviewers in the West Indies disliked *The Middle Passage*. One critic likened Naipaul to "a surgeon who has surrendered to despair." In London, however, Evelyn Waugh hailed Naipaul's "exquisite mastery of the English language" and praised him for being "free of delusion about independence and representative government for his native land." Naipaul welcomed the acclaim, but he would never be entirely at ease among the British literary elite. Once he found himself in an elevator with Waugh's son Auberon, who inquired, "May I call you Vidia?" Naipaul replied, "No, as we've just met, I would rather you called me Mr. Naipaul."

When Naipaul was growing up in Trinidad, India was a resting place of sorts for his imagination, "a country out in the void beyond the dot of Trinidad," an "area of darkness." Yet the physical remnants of India were scattered around him: tattered string

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beds "never repaired because there was no one with this caste skill in Trinidad"; plaited straw mats; brass vessels; books emblazoned with thick, oily ink; brass bells, gongs and camphor burners; a stick of sandalwood; pictures of Hindu deities. In his teenage imagination, fragments from the void coalesced into something rather sinister. In 1949, in a letter to his older sister Kamla, who was studying in India, Naipaul informed her, "I am planning to write a book about these damned people and the wretched country of theirs, exposing their detestable traits. Grill them on everything." In his late 20s, as he grappled with the West Indies in a systematic way, his rancor toward India melded into curiosity, and in 1962 he and Pat embarked on a yearlong journey through the subcontinent, which took them to Delhi, Calcutta, Bombay, Madras, Benares, Nagpur and Kashmir. An account of that trip, *An Area of Darkness*, was published in 1964, and French calls it "the most influential study of India published since independence." Like most of Naipaul's nonfiction, his first book about India was, to a considerable extent, a sly provocation: he wanted to dazzle and enlighten his readers but also to shock them with sentences of this sort: "I had seen Indian villages: the narrow, broken lanes with green slime in the gutters, the choked back-to-back mud houses, the jumble of filth and food and animals and people, the baby in the dust, swollen-bellied, black with flies, but wearing its good-luck amulet."

French's account of the making of *An Area of Darkness* is the most stirring chapter in *The World Is What It Is*. His own journalistic experience in India furnished him with the knowledge, sympathy and contacts to trace Naipaul's footsteps. With brio and wit, he dissects the reportorial methods that Naipaul would employ in nearly all of his subsequent travel books. Prominent friends and acquaintances in Britain and the United States would connect Naipaul with notables on the ground (diplomats, newspaper editors, intellectuals, theater directors, poets, government officials, sophisticated expatriates), some of whom would then be pressed into service as hosts, interlocutors, fixers and guides. A few of his Indian hosts came to despise Naipaul ("he was snobbish…a thoroughly nasty human being," recalled one); others were deeply impressed ("he asked a lot of questions, he was a wonderful listener"). At the end of each working day, Naipaul, with unyielding discipline, would return to his hotel room or guesthouse and write up his notes.

India was a jolting experience for him. One of his guides, Dr. J.P. Singh, recalled that "Naipaul was short with the hotel chaps.… He used to say they are very, very lazy chaps…I thought he was having all this anger and contempt primarily because he wanted the country to develop." Pat, who urged him to modulate and soften his views on India, got an earful as well: "Imagine waiters in the filthiest clothes and with the filthiest hands," Naipaul told her, "serving tea in cups which they arrange in their usual finger-dunking way." Some of his hosts shrewdly perceived that Naipaul felt neglected in India. The esteemed Khushwant Singh told French that he found Naipaul "reserved, pleasant and I think a little disappointed that he hadn't been given the kind of reception he expected as a son of the country who had done well."

When Naipaul finally left India and returned to London, he wasted no time in writing to his Indian friends. He was customarily blunt:

> The lavatories at Palam [airport] were literally covered with shit and the aerodrome officer could only speak of the shortage of staff (i.e. sweepers).… So goodbye to shit and sweepers; goodbye to people who tolerate everything; goodbye to all the refusal to act; goodbye to the absence of dignity; goodbye to the poverty; goodbye to caste and that curious pettiness which permeates that vast country.… Probably I am mad. But it seems to me that everything conspires to keep India down.

As a biographer, French is alive to the nuances, quirks and contradictions in Naipaul's character, and he has an acute sense of his subject's displacement and rootlessness. When Naipaul was traveling in Martinique, he expressed nostalgia "for the good humour, tolerance, amorality and general social chaos of Trinidad." Did he really miss Trinidad, or was his nostalgia a convenient fiction that quelled his sense of being adrift? The land of his ancestors, too, began to exert a pull on him. A few months after returning to London, Naipaul acknowledged to a friend, "I suppose I miss India more than I imagined."

With *The Middle Passage* and *An Area of Darkness*, Naipaul produced rough-edged journalistic reckonings with his past: he traveled, he saw, he wrote. His distinctive personality marked every page of these two books. In 1966 he commenced the research for a very different kind of book: a full-scale history of Trinidad from 1592 to 1813, based almost entirely on documents in the British Museum and the London Library. Early detractors who viewed Naipaul as a Waugh-like Tory might have been taken aback by *The Loss of El Dorado*, a stupendous indictment of Spanish and British imperialism. Published in 1969, the book is Naipaul's most abundant canvas, a Diego Rivera mural in words teeming with adventurers, cannibals, pirates, outlaws, slaves, hangmen, tavern owners, mercenaries and Jacobins. *The Loss of El Dorado* is history written with remarkable skill and poise, and the second half of the book, "The Torture of Luisa Calderon," contains Naipaul's most hypnotic language. Parts of *El Dorado* call to mind Bernal Díaz's eyewitness account of Cortés's triumph in Mexico, *The Conquest of New Spain*. With its sinewy prose, its innovative use of primary sources and its serene contempt for the machinery of empire, it also resembles Robert Hughes's *The Fatal Shore*, and the account of Luisa Calderon's arrest recalls Gabriel García Márquez's novella *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*. Naipaul's editors were impressed: Robert Gottlieb at Knopf felt that it was "a very important as well as very beautiful book, and…it will endure." Indeed, it was one of the six books mentioned in Naipaul's Nobel citation. It sold just 3,000 copies in the United States.

Years ago, in a sparkling reminiscence of Naipaul in *Granta*, Diana Athill, his editor in London, noted that his books tended to sell poorly. Even so, it is surprising to learn precisely how destitute Naipaul was in the 1960s, a time when Anthony Powell declared him Britain's "most talented and promising younger writer." French reports that between 1960 and 1969, Naipaul's gross income after expenses averaged £1,963 a year. "It was a bad time," Naipaul recalled. "Tears lay just below the surface." For several years, in an echo of *A House for Mr. Biswas*, the Naipauls had no home of their own and bounced from place to place. Naipaul's fortunes began to improve in 1970, when, through the benevolence of friends, he and Pat found a cottage in rural Wiltshire. The rent was £3 a week; they stayed for a decade.

It was a highly productive period for Naipaul. On assignment for Robert Silvers of *The New York Review of Books*, he reported from Trinidad, Argentina and Zaire, and the essays Silvers published—coruscating, relentless and brilliant—would be collected in *The Return of Eva Perón, with The Killings in Trinidad*. During Indira Gandhi's Emergency of 1975, Naipaul produced *India: A Wounded Civilization*, an X-ray of Hinduism and the Indian psyche written in his usual pitiless style. When he wasn't working on nonfiction, he wrote the fiction that would

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cement his reputation: *In a Free State* (which won the Booker Prize in 1971), *Guerrillas* and *A Bend in the River*. (The opening lines of *A Bend in the River* gave French the title for his book: "The world is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it.") These three books are dark, brooding, deeply unsentimental depictions of postcolonial Africa and the Caribbean. *A Bend in the River* unfolds in a chaotic landscape modeled on Mobutu's Zaire, and like *Guerrillas* it contains scenes of sexual violence that remain shocking today.

French contends that by the early 1970s, critics and readers were ready for a Naipaulian perspective on the Third World: "A rising disillusion with the post-colonial project in many countries led to Vidia being projected as the voice of truth, the scourge who by virtue of his ethnicity and his intellect could see things that others were seeking to disguise." Owing to the singularity of his vision, and to his politics (he stood for "high civilization, individual rights and the rule of law"), Naipaul was worthy of such a pulpit, French suggests. "He was the man without loyalties…who would write the truth as he saw it.… His moral axis… was internal, it was himself." But some of Naipaul's most attentive readers were dismayed by the extent to which darkness now permeated his work. After reading *In a Free State*, Peter Bayley, Naipaul's mentor at Oxford, wrote to his former student, "Perhaps I was wrong to see personal unhappiness, alienation, loneliness, humiliation so clearly behind it all." Salman Rushdie would later observe that "an affection for the human race" infused *Miguel Street*, *The Suffrage of Elvira* and *Biswas*, but the "dark clouds" that gathered over "Naipaul's inner world" have "not lifted, but deepened." Edward Said wanted Naipaul to be like Nadine Gordimer, a writer who examined the Third World with "sympathetic insight" rather than with the despondency of a "scavenger."

The 1971 Booker Prize, and the success of *Guerrillas*, brought Naipaul an avalanche of invitations, awards and teaching offers, and in 1978 he spent a year as a visiting professor at Wesleyan. French says his courses were "brilliantly inventive," but his patience with students who missed deadlines was short: "You are like officials in the Congo," he informed them. "You are corrupt." Rancor toward Naipaul was percolating in the American academy, where he became "indefensible." "Vidia's response to the growth in his reputation as a villain was to stoke it," French writes. His rhetorical prod was wielded in a "Trinidian street style." In response to a barrage of criticism from Said and others, Naipaul made a point, during interviews, of consistently mispronouncing Said's last name (as the past participle of "say") and shooing the reporters away: "I don't know these people.… You must go and talk to Mr. Said about it."

For the first time in his life, Naipaul began to earn substantial amounts of money. In 1983 *Vanity Fair* paid $75,000 for his essential "Prologue to an Autobiography," which was reprinted in *Finding the Center*. In 1986 William Shawn offered $78,000 for the right to excerpt *The Enigma of Arrival* in *The New Yorker*. In Naipaul's negotiations for fees, old and noted friends were treated shabbily. In the early '70s, Robert Silvers, who had showcased Naipaul's work in *The New York Review of Books* since 1963, borrowed money from a friend to send Naipaul on a reporting trip to Argentina. In 1990 Naipaul and his agent offered extracts to Silvers for $125,000; Silvers could offer $10,000. "Never one to forgive a past favor," French writes, "the man without loyalties threatened to break his links with *The New York Review*."

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In 1990, nearly four decades after he arrived penniless in London, Naipaul was knighted. He went alone to the palace, by train, wearing a charcoal gray suit. His personal darkness began to abate slightly. In 1993 Harold Pinter invited Vidia and Pat to view his play *No Man's Land*. As Pat would later write to Pinter, "I cannot remember sitting next to Vidia emanating approval and enjoyment to that degree for so long for years and years." In later books like *The Enigma of Arrival* and *A Way in the World*, the old rage and fury were, to a certain extent, supplanted by elegiac rumination. In a sense Naipaul even reconciled with an India that was no longer down, aligning himself with the Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party, which did not endear him to Indian liberals. As he told the *Financial Times* in 2004, "I am staggered by the amount of intelligence and education that now exists in India and the strivingness of the culture."

A book launched with a note scrawled in violet ink wasn't torpedoed by Naipaul's red pen.

Patrick French conveys a better sense of the man than the work. Focused on the life, he for the most part neglects the books. French devotes just several hundred words of tepid analysis to a description of *A House for Mr. Biswas*, and his assessment of Naipaul's best-known work is wan: "The novel…is universal in the way that the work of Dickens or Tolstoy is universal." French seems to assume that his readers have digested Naipaul's *oeuvre*, and so, with certain exceptions, like *A Way in the World*, he does not describe or analyze the books in any serious detail. With the novels, one longs to hear more about the plot, the tone, the narrative style, the themes and obsessions. With the travel writing and nonfiction, French sidesteps questions and debates that have always swirled around Naipaul's work: was India in 1975 really a "wounded civilization"? Of *The Return of Eva Perón*, Edward Said remarked, "There isn't any real analysis in his essays, only observation"; Joan Didion parried that "he is a writer for whom the theoretical has no essential application." Is Didion's defense persuasive? Does French accept the Swedish Academy's assertion that Naipaul occupies the same rarefied heights as Voltaire?

Naipaul is a virtuoso of English prose, but French has nothing of substance to say about his style, including his scrupulous employment of the semicolon. Nor does French explore the writers who influenced and inspired his subject. Naipaul has an affectionate interest in the work of R.K. Narayan, whose Chekhovian novels, set in the imaginary south Indian town of Malgudi, have lost none of their insight and charm. Naipaul cited Narayan in his Nobel lecture and offered provocative readings of his fiction in *An Area of Darkness* and *India: A Wounded Civilization*. French also neglects Conrad. *A Bend in the River*, as many have noted, owes much to *Heart of Darkness*. Naipaul was also a close reader of *The Secret Agent*, and his most wicked thrusts at left-wing charlatans—like Michael X, who engineered grisly murders in Trinidad in 1972—resemble Conrad's magnificent disgust with London's anarchist milieu. Perhaps French believes that all these matters are best left to the professors. Whatever the case, a consideration of them would have added intellectual depth to the book.

What does interest French, to a lamentable degree, are the intimate details of Naipaul's personal and sexual life, and his relationships with three women in particular. This preoccupation distorts the book's architecture and almost derails its narrative: French's normally crisp prose becomes slack, gossipy, slightly incoherent and meddlesome. Naipaul married Patricia Hale when they were both 22. He neglected to give her a ring (she purchased one herself), and he soon misplaced the marriage certificate; his callousness and cruelty knew no bounds. In some notes he scribbled in 2001, Naipaul confessed, "The relationship—on VSN's side—was more than half a lie. Based really on need." He was speaking not of sexual need but rather of emotional, domestic and professional fortification. He came to rely on Pat as a reader and critic of his work. French, who is deeply and properly sympathetic to Pat, shows in numbing detail how she served as her husband's amanuensis; he even compares her to "great, tragic, literary spouses" like Sonia Tolstoy, Jane Carlyle and Leonard Woolf.

In April 1972, while reporting from Buenos Aires, Naipaul met a 30-year-old Anglo-Argentine named Margaret Gooding, whom French describes as "tempestuous, cynical, sexy." On the same day he met Gooding, Naipaul received a letter from Pat, vacationing in Trinidad, who wrote, "Look after yourself and dress sensibly but don't pile on the clothes indoors with central heating.… I suppose you would be impossible if you were here but I would not mind." Naipaul began an affair with Gooding, one that would last twenty-four years, and he soon informed Diana Athill, "I am having carnal pleasure for the first time in my life." The affair, in addition to Naipaul's later public confession that he had patronized prostitutes, had a devastating effect on Pat (she succumbed to cancer in 1996). "She suffered," Naipaul told French in 2005. "It could be said that I had killed her. It could be said. I feel a little bit that way."

French devotes many pages to Naipaul's affair with Gooding (fewer pages would have sufficed), and not many details escape his attention: "Vidia flew to meet Margaret in… Marrakech at the Hotel Mamounia, where their bill listed little but 'étage' (room service), suggesting they were too busy to leave the room." Scrutinizing hotel receipts, peering through keyholes: this is hardly French at his finest. He does provide a chilling coda, however. During the final months of Pat's life, Naipaul was reporting from Pakistan, where he met a journalist named Nadira Khannum Alvi. He dumped his longtime mistress and began an affair with Nadira, who arrived at Naipaul's home in Britain six days after Pat's death. Several weeks later she became Lady Naipaul.

Despite its shortcomings, *The World Is What It Is* is a formidable achievement. It contains a remarkable accumulation of rich, minute detail; covers a vast amount of history and politics in an effortless manner; and navigates difficult emotional territory with a very high degree of compassion, subtlety and authority. The book is engrossing, with French pulling surprises out of his hat from the opening pages. A startling sentence appears in the introduction: "He had the opportunity to read the completed manuscript, but requested no changes." A book launched with a note scrawled in violet ink wasn't torpedoed by Naipaul's red pen. Reviewers in Britain (where the book was published last spring) have commented on Naipaul's unusual decision to expose himself to withering biographical scrutiny. John Carey put it nicely in the *Sunday Times*: "He has chosen to submit himself to the truth-telling and ruthless objectivity that have always characterized his own work." (French calls it "an act of narcissism and humility.") In a speech in Tulsa in 1994, Naipaul declared, "The lives of writers are a legitimate subject of inquiry; and the truth should not be skimped." And so it wasn't. ■

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BACK TALK

ADRIAN BELLESGUARD

Toni Morrison

Toni Morrison is the Nobel Prize–winning author of *Beloved*, *The Bluest Eye*, *Song of Solomon* and other works. Her new novel, *A Mercy* (Knopf; $23.95), tells the story of the makeshift family formed by a Dutch trader, his wife and their slaves in several North American colonies during the 1680s.

—*Christine Smallwood*

Last year, in your letter endorsing Barack Obama, you specifically cited his "creative imagination." What do you think of him as a writer?

I think my introduction to him was the speech at the Democratic National Convention, you know, back in 2004. And then I read his book *Dreams From My Father*, and I was amazed because he writes so well. Really well, with really nice big, strong, artful sentences. But equally important was his reflection. You know, I'm not accustomed to that. I've read memoirs where people talk about their lives, and sometimes they're modest. Sometimes they excuse themselves—you know, the big ones, like *My Life* by Bill Clinton. They're very interesting books, but nobody was a writer, with reflection and change and meditation and strength. *Dreams From My Father* was very, very compelling. So I got interested in him.

What are your thoughts on the state of African-American literature today?

I'm not terribly up on it, but my impression is that it is thriving. Really thriving. You have everyone from Edwidge Danticat to Colson Whitehead. And of course, the literature of young Asian writers is also very interesting to me. The range is what is so fabulous. For me, the thing was to write a book, a work of fiction, that was as good in its field as, say, black music was in its own. Which is to say, to write to that high critical standard that African-Americans have about everything. In athletics, music, art, whatever they were doing, people have had to face a highly critical African-American audience. I wanted to write a book that would have the same high standards. And if that worked, then the rest of the world would be interested as well, because it wasn't a protest novel! It would be about something else. And done in a manner that was worthy of the genre.

What kind of reading and research did you do for *A Mercy*? Was the process different from what it was for other books you've written?

A little bit more than usual because the novel is about such early stuff. I had a lot of help because historians and anthropologists and biologists have been writing about the era for years. The first thing I had to do was find out what was there—the plant life, the tree life, the weather. One book that was most helpful, which I read over and over, was *Changes in the Land* [by William Cronon]. I could find out if there really was lettuce or dandelions or how big the trees were. So that gave me a grounded sense of the places that I had chosen, which were upstate New York and down in Maryland and Virginia.

What about the colonists and the lives they left in Europe?

I consulted migration patterns to find out who these people were, the average person who came to the colonies. Then I had to know, what were they leaving behind? Most of them were told to leave or go to jail. I found this really extraordinary book called *Hubbub: Filth, Noise and Stench in England, 1600–1770* [by Emily Cockayne]. She looked at the laws of the time—how you could not beat your wife after 9 o'clock—what rumors were like, how close people lived to one another. I got the feeling that when they came to this country, they were drunk because the air was clear—the umbrellas in England were black because the rain was full of soot! But all that's just a matter of surrounding yourself with the atmosphere and having a persuasive familiarity with more than just the story—the context. What were they running from, what could have happened to them, what about children and how people dealt with them? You have *Oliver Twist*, but when you see those children shipped to Virginia by the boatload! I could have spent years doing this because I love research, but at some point you have to write the book.

You've said that you need to hear your characters' voices before you start to write. In *A Mercy* there are several mesmerizing characters: the young slave, Florens; the Dutch farmer, Jacob Vaark; his wife, Rebekka, who has fled the poverty, filth, crime and sickness of London. Whose voice did you hear first?

I heard Florens's first, the girl. And she approaches language in a slanted way. She can read and write; she learned from a Catholic priest under scary circumstances. And she's taken someplace else; she doesn't know what they're talking about. When she was with her mother she spoke Portuguese. She knows Latin. So I just put all her language together and gave her an individual voice that was "I"—first person—and very visual. But also, once I realized that I could make her speak only in the present tense, it gave the narrative an immediacy, it made me disciplined in revealing what she thought, and it gave her a kind of innocence and, at the same time, a kind of sophistication.

You've talked about how official languages can stifle identity. Do you have any thoughts about the ways that technologies like e-mail and texting are changing how people speak and write?

Language changes—and should—because it is as alive as its speakers and writers. It is stifling or bad only when unclear, mediocre, false or wholly devoid of creative imagination. That may apply to some texting and e-mail, but not all. ■

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AMHERST COLLEGE ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

An 1847 daguerreotype of Emily Dickinson, age 17

Her Nature Was Future

by ANGE MLINKO

Poetry and biography work at cross-purposes. Even when their facts overlap, one is artifice of the imagination, the other a record of the mortal coil. Poems convince us of a living presence on the page; biography, as Emily Dickinson noted, "first convinces us of the fleeing of the Biographied."

When chronicling the lives of poets, though, it seems inevitable that some measure of poetry creeps in. Dickinson, whose neighbors in Amherst called her "the Myth," is a perfect example of a subject whose ambiguities encourage a meshing of the genres. It can work to genius effect, as in Susan Howe's *My Emily Dickinson*, a devotional work published in 1985 that probes Dickinson's allusions to Shakespeare, Emily Brontë, Robert Browning and others. It culminates in a glorious and harrowing vision of Dickinson as Childe Roland "at the moment of sinking down with the sun, like Phaeton in a ball of flame, see[ing] his visionary precursor peers ringed round him waiting." If Howe's study succeeded in becoming a kind of poem itself, it did so because Howe's intentions rhyme with those of Dickinson. Her book is formally and thematically complex, passionate, provocatively inconclusive, coiled and taut. Now there are two new additions to the Dickinson bibliotheca. What kind of poems would they be?

White Heat
The Friendship of Emily Dickinson & Thomas Wentworth Higginson.
By Brenda Wineapple.
Knopf. 416 pp. $27.95.

A Summer of Hummingbirds
By Christopher Benfey.
Penguin. 287 pp. $25.95.

Brenda Wineapple's *White Heat* looks at the correspondence (in both senses of the word) between Dickinson and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a minister, essayist and eminent Bostonian, that spanned a quarter of a century. If *White Heat* were a poem, it would, like Dickinson's poems, revel in paradox and upend clichés. First and foremost, Wineapple sets out to rescue her subjects from stereotype. She puts further distance between Dickinson and the "Belle of Amherst" label that shadowed her for decades, and she rehabilitates Higginson, who fell into disrepute as Dickinson's editor when the extent of his revisions, made while readying a selection of her work for book publication in 1890, became a flash point in the twentieth century. The disdain is evident in Adrienne Rich's famous poem "I Am in Danger—Sir—" but it goes back to the year of Higginson's death, 1911. That was when George Santayana—teacher of T.S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens—delivered a lecture called "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy," declaring that Higginson's brand of Transcendentalism "has floated gently in the backwater." Higginson was the fusty *Atlantic Monthly* columnist to Dickinson's ungovernable and unappreciated genius.

But in the decade preceding their correspondence, which Dickinson initiated in 1862, Higginson was an abolitionist with a rosy view of what we now call "collateral damage." In 1854 he declared, against the return of a runaway slave who had been seized in Boston, "A revolution is begun! not a Reform, but a Revolution. If you take part in politics henceforward, let it be only to bring nearer the crisis which will either save or sunder this nation—or perhaps save in sundering." He participated in a botched plot to liberate the prisoner, taking a battering ram to the doors of the Boston courthouse and clashing with the police inside—one guard was killed in the melee. He was indicted (briefly) for treason. After the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Higginson helped arm antislavery homesteaders in Kansas and became one of John Brown's "Secret Six," planning and financing the violent insurrection at Harpers Ferry in 1859. John Brown "swallows a Missourian whole, and says grace after the meal," Hig-

Ange Mlinko's most recent book is Starred Wire. *She lives in New York's Hudson Valley.*

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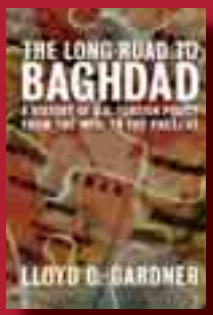

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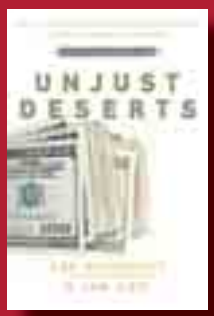

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ginson declared in the pages of the *Liberator*. "Don't you know that 'No' is the wildest word we consign to Language?" Dickinson speculated. Higginson surely agreed. He said no to his country, as Wineapple shows, in uncompromising terms.

Paradox was a hallmark of Dickinson's verse ("A Death blow is a Life blow to Some/Who till they died, did not alive become—"), and Wineapple, too, uses paradox (beginning with her title) to frame her subjects. Dickinson was "a poseur deeply sincere." Higginson was "a curious mix of caution and courage." And their relationship is framed within a larger paradox: are words not actions? The story of the friendship is backlit by scenes from Higginson's days as an activist and military officer (in the Civil War he led the first federally authorized regiment of freed slaves, the First South Carolina Volunteers). In 1864 he retired to literary life, disillusioned with activism. Yet he was never able to pursue intellectual greatness—what Dickinson called "immortality"—at the expense of social justice. Wineapple sees Higginson and Dickinson as flip sides of a coin: "The fantasy of isolation, the fantasy of intervention: they create recluses and activists, sometimes both, in us all." By mapping these contradictions so scrupulously, Wineapple allows Dickinson and Higginson their full measure of humanity.

Covering some of the same ground, Christopher Benfey's *A Summer of Hummingbirds* isn't, properly speaking, a biography. It is an account of a cultural moment, the summer of 1882, when the literati were breaking sexual taboos and finding a metaphor for this liberation in hummingbirds, which had been popularized by early-nineteenth-century naturalists. Benfey marshals Dickinson and Higginson into this "informal cult," which included contemporaries Martin Heade, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Mark Twain. If this book were a poem, it would be refined, sociable and wrapped up neatly in its conceit. It would also be didactic: "In science and in art, in religion and in love," Benfey writes, Americans "came to see a new dynamism and movement in their lives, a brave new world of instability and evanescence. This dynamism…found perfect expression in the hummingbird."

It's true to some degree: Heade painted them, Henry Ward Beecher stuffed them, Dickinson and Higginson referred to them. But there was a whole lot of amateur naturalism going on in those circles; Benfey bears down on the hummingbird imagery because it provides an objective correlative for his real story: a sort of postbellum Summer of Love. There's Emily Dickinson: "reclining," as her sister-in-law put it, in the arms of her father's colleague Judge Otis Lord. There's the Amherst artiste Mabel Loomis Todd: letting Martin Heade paint the panels of her plunging collar with sweet peas; befriending the besotted teenager Ned Dickinson; dropping him for his father, Austin.

Benfey's sanguine take on the hummingbird cult and its symbolism vis-à-vis evolution and social upheaval ("brave new world") is hard to reconcile with the cunning poet of *White Heat*. If there was a hummingbird cult, it was a repression of the anxieties caused by increasing disenchantment with the world—a crisis of faith that, for Dickinson and Higginson, lay at the heart of their aesthetic struggles. Here is the Dickinson whom Benfey leans on for support:

> A Route of Evanescence
> With a revolving Wheel—
> A Resonance of Emerald—
> A Rush of Cochineal—
> And every Blossom on the Bush
> Adjusts its tumbled Head—
> The Mail from Tunis, probably,
> An easy Morning's Ride—

This was her "signature poem"; Benfey reports she "sometimes signed it 'Humming-Bird,' as though she herself were its evanescent subject." If she circulated it widely—seven people was a lot for her—it makes sense: the poem is accessible, sociable, felicitous. But to suggest that it is one of her best edges us back to the sentimental Belle of Amherst. Compare it with "My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—" whose temperature is more typical of the poet discussed in *White Heat*. It is not a poem to send to an acquaintance. Rather than miniaturizing its author-subject, it aggrandizes her. Rather than celebrating "evanescence," it looks into the abyss of our awful contingency. Susan

The Sea-Fight Tomorrow

Afraid to take a chance. They
pass haphazardly in all directions.
Diving into his car. Or yours.

Are there no strangers in town?
Entering, leaving, crossing. I
cross to the window and wave.

Everybody looks alike. Pyramids.
It must be somebody who
has a house in the country.

He said he would. Characteristic
kinesthetic and tactile deficits on opposite
sides of the body. Something clicked somewhere.

It's got to be airtight on
the other end. The butterfly-shaped
central gray. Who is this man?

It was a restful ride. The transition
gradual, without sharp
demarcation. The house was full of pictures.

The night man was gone. Important
changes from level to level. I
pretend to listen.

KEITH WALDROP

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Howe speculated in *My Emily Dickinson* that this poem was inspired by Higginson's grisly essay "Nat Turner's Insurrection," which recounted in graphic detail the torture and execution of the rebellious slaves:

My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—
In Corners—till a Day
The Owner passed—identified—
And carried Me away—

And now We roam in Sovereign Woods—
And now We hunt the Doe—
And every time I speak for Him—
The Mountains straight reply—

And do I smile, such cordial light
Upon the Valley glow—
It is as a Vesuvian face
Had let its pleasure through—

And when at Night—Our good Day done—
I guard My Master's Head—
'Tis better than the Eider-Duck's
Deep Pillow—to have shared—

To foe of His—I'm deadly foe—
None stir the second time—
On whom I lay a Yellow Eye—
Or an emphatic Thumb—

Though I than He—may longer live
He longer must—than I—
For I have but the power to kill
Without—the power to die—

This poem delivers a jolt to the nervous system, and its mysteries will be pondered for as long as its English is intelligible. Wineapple doesn't overdo the gun motif, but she suggests the affinity between the friends when she describes Dickinson's style as "explosively nonverbal" and quotes Higginson quoting Thoreau: "the art of composition is as simple as the discharge of a bullet from a rifle." Benfey, by contrast, returns to his hummingbird conceit at inappropriate moments. He quotes Dickinson on hearing that Judge Lord was gravely ill: "I grasped at a passing Chair. My sight slipped and I thought I was freezing." Benfey concludes cheerfully: "Meanwhile, the birds were returning, the flowers were blooming, and New England was rounding into summer." If this book were a poem, its stanzas might end on the refrain, "We had joy, we had fun, we had seasons in the sun."

Wineapple's Dickinson is a spinster seductress—white heat itself. She flattered and cajoled her epistolary conquests while retaining the upper hand, almost never leaving the realm of the Homestead, the Dickinson family's mansion and grounds. From her first letter to Higginson, when he was 38 and she 31, Dickinson was wily: "Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?" she wrote, without signing her name, but enclosing four poems amounting to a self-addressed stamped envelope to ensure his reply. When he made a few editorial suggestions, she thanked him but incorporated none of them. She said she had begun writing poetry only recently—untrue. She said she avoided Walt Whitman—untrue. (Higginson loathed him.) She hid her few publications and her attempts to engage other editors. In 1866 she insisted falsely that her poem "A narrow Fellow in the Grass," which appeared in the *Springfield Republican*,

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was stolen. (She published fewer than a dozen poems during her life, anonymously.) Higginson was, she said, her "Preceptor." But the outrageous pupil would declare things like "If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire could ever warm me I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry." They met only twice in the course of their lives, possibly because after their first encounter Higginson confessed he had never met anyone "who drained my nerve power so much. Without touching her, she drew from me. I am glad not to live near her."

Dickinson's sexual paradox stands in for a greater one: her belief that one could have victory without success—not only seduction without sex but immortality without fame. As she got older she hardened in her resolve not to publish, but she worked feverishly toward an *oeuvre*:

> Success—is counted sweetest
> By those who ne'er succeed—
> To Comprehend a Nectar—
> Requires sorest need—
> Not one of all the Purple Host
> Who took the Flag—today—
> Can tell the Definition—so clear—of Victory—
> As He—defeated—dying—
> On whose forbidden ear—
> The distant strains of Triumph
> Burst—agonized—and Clear!

Despite Wineapple's sympathetic grasp of Higginson's life and works, his contradictions aren't nearly as electric. Yes, he too had a vigorous and complicated sexuality. The renowned essayist had thrived on the routines of military life: he championed virility and admired the male body. Women found him attractive, and he made himself their chivalrous knight as a suffragist. Also chivalrously, he remained devoted to his invalid first wife until she died. Then, rather than fall for one of the intellectual women he admired, he hastily married a young, pretty society girl. (It's less of a contradiction when we read that his first wife, Mary Elizabeth Channing, was something of a thwarted intellectual herself. She was prickly and anti-child. Higginson desperately wanted children; his second wife obliged.) Wineapple's accounts of Higginson's involvement in the Secret Six and of his military exploits are riveting. They serve to underscore her point that he was a sort of inverse Dickinson: fiery radical in the realm of action. Late in life he ruefully admitted that he had internalized Emerson's dictum "Better that the book should not be quite so good, and the bookmaker abler and better, and not himself often a ludicrous contrast to all that he has written." But Emerson was wrong. Higginson's scruples, and Dickinson's lack of them, confirm the old Faulkner saw about "Ode on a Grecian Urn" being "worth any number of old ladies." Collateral damage indeed.

Higginson knew what the stakes were. In 1862, the year Dickinson initiated their correspondence, he published an essay in *The Atlantic*, "Procession of the Flowers":

> There is no conceivable beauty of blossom so beautiful as words,—none so graceful, none so perfumed. It is possible to dream of combinations of syllables so delicious that all the dawning and decay of summer cannot rival their perfection, nor winter's stainless white and azure match their purity and their charm.

It's a rare voluptuary who loves "combinations of syllables," yet Dickinson surpassed him as a fundamentalist surpasses a mere evangelical. When, in 1883, Higginson declared Shakespeare's "Since

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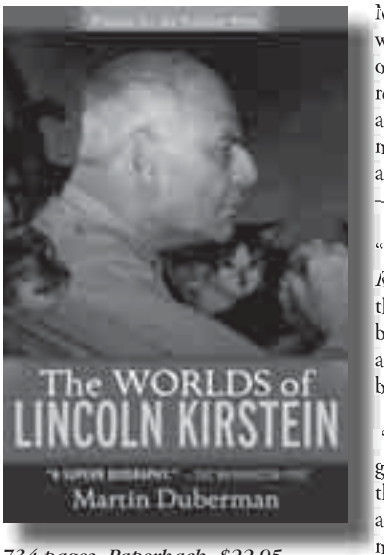

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Cleopatra died" one of the supreme emotional phrases in literature, Dickinson did him one better: "That engulfing '*Since*'—." Gertrude Stein said, "A sentence is not emotional a paragraph is." But for Dickinson, there was agony and ecstasy in morphemes. The poems, of course, bear this out, but perhaps it's even clearer in the letters, with their direct address, that for Dickinson thought and emotion were one flashing thing, fused in the heat of a rhyme:

> Love is its own rescue, for we—at our supremest, are but it's trembling Emblems.
>
> I felt it shelter to speak to you.
>
> His nature was Future.

Even at the death of her 8-year-old nephew, Gib, in 1882—a blow from which she never recovered—she could write to her sister-in-law, in crescendoing phrases: "His Life was like the Bugle, which winds itself always, his Elegy an echo—his Requiem ecstasy." Her metaphors were dictated by the ear; her cerebrum seemed to have grown right out of her cochlear nerve.

Dickinson's more famous contemporary Helen Hunt Jackson once chided her: "You are a great poet—and it is a wrong to deny to the day you live in, that you will not sing aloud. When you are what men call dead, you will be sorry you were so stingy." When Dickinson died in 1886, her nearly 2,000 poems bore witness to a soul that was anything but stingy. But their discovery prompted feuds among her survivors—Lavinia, her sister; Sue Dickinson, her socially prominent sister-in-law; and Mabel Loomis Todd, her brother Austin's mistress and a writer and painter in her own right. Lavinia and Mabel teamed up against Sue, enlisting Higginson's editorial help in assembling a collection of poems; later, Lavinia would vengefully sue Mabel on a separate property issue and demand that Higginson leave Todd's name off the book (he refused, but on the property matter, Oliver Wendell Holmes ruled in Lavinia's favor). Higginson was just a bystander to these machinations, but blame fell heavily on him when scholars uncovered the extent to which grammar had been corrected, punctuation and titles added, dashes disappeared.

The truth is complicated, as Wineapple's scrupulous account of the preparation of Dickinson's *Poems* shows. For one thing, those changes were made at the behest of the only publisher who would consider issuing a volume. For another, the manuscripts were riddled with indeterminacies. Though Dickinson famously sewed up poems in fastidious booklike packets (Todd dubbed them "fascicles," and it stuck), she also composed on scraps of paper, the backs of recipe cards and in the midst of letters to her correspondents. Her handwriting was difficult to decipher: Higginson compared it to "the famous fossil bird-tracks" in the Amherst museum. Most important, as Wineapple reports, "She kept variants and appears not to have chosen among them, sometimes toying with as many as eight possibilities for words, line arrangement, rhyme, enjambment; nor did she choose among alternate endings." Short of a facsimile reproduction, Dickinson's work will always require editorial interpretation. It just so happens that the twentieth century was far better prepared to read Dickinson's poems on their own terms—variants and all—than was the nineteenth century. ("Her true Flaubert was Penelope," Richard Howard once quipped, simultaneously rewriting that other famous reviser Ezra Pound and writing Dickinson into high Modernism.) Benfey relates how Jay Leyda, a mid-twentieth-century Dickinson scholar with a background in avant-garde photography and film, was the first to recognize "a manuscript about a bird formed of two parts of an envelope pinned together to resemble a bird…a poem about a house written beneath the rooflike arc of another envelope."

Yet the first edition of *Poems* sold out—as did the second and the third and the fourth—suggesting that the nineteenth century was ready for Dickinson in some form. Wineapple writes, "Fed for years on Tennyson, Patmore, and Longfellow or, more recently, on the folksy verse of James Whitcomb Riley and the jingles of Rudyard Kipling, to say nothing of the verse of Thomas Bailey Aldrich, they were evidently tired of the didacticism and overrefinement of poetry without heat." They were weary, in other words, of hummingbirds.

Higginson lived out his later years in physical, if not mental, comfort. He championed women's writing. He translated Epictetus, the freed slave turned Stoic philosopher. The influence of Transcendentalism, in which his soul was minted, had faded from American life, and in the waning days of the nineteenth century he deplored the excesses of the Gilded Age, scoffing: "Everything which does not tend to money is thought to be wasted." He felt that Dickinson was posthumously keeping the flame of spirit alive with her "irresistible needle-touch" (as he wrote, in 1890, in this magazine). She still is. Are words not actions? "Of our greatest acts we are ignorant—You were not aware that you saved my Life." When Dickinson wrote this to Higginson in 1868, she must have known that the events they set in motion together would, for others, do the same. ■

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Col. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, First South Carolina Volunteers, age 38, 1862

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How Wood Works

by WILLIAM DERESIEWICZ

How Fiction Works
By James Wood.
Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 265 pp. $24.

MIRIAM BERKLEY

James Wood, 2008

An iron law of American life decrees that the provinces of thought be limited in the collective consciousness to a single representative. Like a poor man's Noah, we take one of each. One physicist: Stephen Hawking. One literary theorist: Harold Bloom. One radical social critic: Noam Chomsky. Before her death, we had one intellectual, Susan Sontag, and one only. (Now we've dispensed with the category altogether.) We are great anointers in this country, a habit that obviates the need for scrutiny. We don't want to have to go into the ins and outs of a thing—weigh merits, examine histories, enter debates. We just want to put a face on it—the logic of celebrity culture—and move on.

It has been decided of late that the face of literary criticism shall belong to James Wood. A writer first at the *Guardian* (from 1992 to 1996), then at *The New Republic* and now, since last year, at *The New Yorker*, Wood has long been considered, in a formulation that soon assumed a ritual cast, "the best critic of his generation." Coming from elders like Sontag, Bloom and Saul Bellow, and nearly always incorporating that meaningless word "generation," these consecrations have bespoken a kind of Oedipal conflict, betraying the double urge first to possess one's offspring by defining them, then to destroy them altogether. For Wood has come to be seen as something more than the best of his generation: not just the best, full stop, regardless of generation, but the one, the only, even the last. Beside him, none; after him, none other. The line ends here.

Contributing to this mythology is a belief in cultural decline, as constitutive a feature of modern consciousness as its reciprocal faith, a belief in material progress. Cynthia Ozick recently called for a "thicket of Woods," a battalion of critics raised in Wood's image, to renovate not only literary criticism but literature itself. Wood is the "template," Ozick announced, from which a new cultural "infrastructure" must be built—or rebuilt. For Ozick, Wood recalls the glory days of American criticism during the middle of the last century, the age of Edmund Wilson, Lionel Trilling, Alfred Kazin and Irving Howe. Indeed, he may surpass these forebears. "We have not heard a critical mind like this at work," Ozick declared, "since Trilling's *The Liberal Imagination*." *The Liberal Imagination* was published in 1950. Everything since includes some of Wilson, most of Trilling himself and nearly all of Kazin and Howe. Perhaps Ozick was only indulging in a bit of polemical hyperbole, but the comparison she urges convinces me that there may be something to the idea of cultural decline after all. Wood may be the best we have, but to set him next to Wilson, Trilling, Kazin and Howe is to see exactly how far we have fallen.

But before we measure that distance, let us first give Wood his due. It is large. A critic's first necessity is learning, and Wood's learning is immense. He has not only read all the novels; he has read all the lives, all the letters and all the manifestoes, and he quotes them, with an exquisite ear for accent and echo, as if he'd read them all yesterday. He has read criticism, theory, aesthetics and, a special interest of his, theology. The apostate son of an evangelical childhood, he writes about literature as if our souls depended on it, which, for any serious reader, they do. For Wood, literature is truth, or as close as we're going to get to it in a world without God. In this postmodernist age, when Wood's *New Yorker* colleague Louis Menand can note, with a sense of amused relief, that the language of entertainment has displaced the language of moral seriousness in popular literary discourse; when Caleb Crain can declare, in the hipster literary journal *n+1*, that "literature is only an art," no more worthy of university instruction than wine tasting; when those same universities can turn literature over to ideologues who fear and despise it; Wood's unapologetic commitment to literature's transcendent value and criticism's high calling is his most important virtue.

The charge of that commitment is transmitted by the electricity of his style. Wood's writing is stretched taut by his command of syntax, made brilliant by his virtuosity of metaphoric coloration. For Wood, Melville "went tidally, between belief and unbelief"; "Flaubert's characters are doomed, while Chekhov's are only imprisoned"; Coleridge's style features "voluminous sentences that stretch like library corridors"; "Woolf's work is a kind of tattoo peeled off the English poets and rubbed onto her sentences"; Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*, a faux eighteenth-century novel, "functions as an allegorical picaresque, rolling the brougham of itself from implication to implication, taking on extra implications at one town, and throwing off a few at the next." These are more than ornaments. In his essay on Woolf, Wood argues that the metaphoric abundance of her critical prose marks "her nearness to her subjects—her ability to use an artistic language," and so it is with him. So intimate is Wood with his authors, so feelingly does he follow the movements of their minds, that he seems to write from within the books themselves. His essays, snatches of an ongoing conversation, open midstride. Eschewing the old or fashionable question, he is always already on the second thought.

That conversation spirals around the issue that organizes all of Wood's thinking about fiction. In the words of the subtitle of his first collection, *The Broken Estate*, it is the issue of "literature and belief." How do novels coax us toward belief in things we know to be untrue? How do authors create believable characters? How can novelistic language be at once literary and realistic? How has the nature of verisimilitude—the image we consent to call "real"—changed over the course of literary history? What does it mean to believe a fiction in the first place? Wood addresses these questions through two principal means: broad examination of the evolution of novelistic technique and close stylistic analysis. (It is the first of these, his attention to "indebted-

William Deresiewicz is a Nation *contributing writer.*

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ness" and "connectedness," his ability to think the whole of the novel's history in a single thought, that especially recommends him to Ozick.) Wood shows us how unreliable narration developed from Dostoyevsky to Knut Hamsun to Italo Svevo, how stream of consciousness begins in Shakespearean soliloquy and moves to Jane Austen's refinement of free indirect discourse before erupting into the Modernist technique that bears that name. These discussions are never abstractly theoretical but grounded in Wood's microscopic alertness to verbal texture: how Chekhov "bends" his language around his characters so that it seems to spring from their minds, how Bellow renders detail so as to make it both modernly impressionistic and classically solid, how D.H. Lawrence causes a seemingly ordinary description to glimmer with religious intimations.

In all this, Wood is centrally concerned with the ways novelists tell the truth about the world, how they "produce art that accurately sees 'the way things are,'" and it is here that we begin to see both his project's deepest motives and the first of its limitations. Wood's ideal authors are those, like Chekhov and Mann and the Sicilian writer Giovanni Verga, who are able to invent characters who seem to break free of their creators' intentions, who feel "real to themselves"—and thus to us—because they "forget" they are fictional. A novelist's ultimate achievement is to enable us to know a character so well that we catch a glimpse of his inviolable unknowability, his singular quiddity—in other words, though Wood doesn't use the term, his soul. While Wood esteems Flaubert and, to a lesser extent, Nabokov, he finally finds their exquisite artistic control too confining (hence his remark about Flaubert's characters being "doomed"). For Wood, the essential authorial endowment is what Keats called "negative capability"—the ability to remain hospitable to alien styles of being and antithetical beliefs and values.

A critic who prizes realness above all else will naturally favor a realist aesthetic. Wood's touchstones are Austen, Tolstoy, James, Chekhov, Mann, Bellow, Naipaul. Of antirealist writers—experimentalists, postmodernists, magical realists; Rushdie, DeLillo, Zadie Smith—he is famously critical (though with exceptions, like José Saramago). He extols Joyce and tips his hat to Kafka and Beckett, but he has little to say about them, and when he does say something about Joyce—or Woolf, for that matter—he makes them sound like realists, avoiding everything that is characteristically experimental or Modernist about them. He acknowledges the force of J.M. Coetzee's work, which is founded on allegory and parable, but rather than investigating that force, he chooses to pick an argument with Coetzee's most realistic and therefore least characteristic novel, *Disgrace*.

There is a larger issue at work here, and it is precisely that of literature and belief. *The Broken Estate* is framed as an inquiry into the transmutations of belief as it migrated from religion to fiction during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In its title essay, Wood remarks that "the child of evangelicalism, if he does not believe, inherits nevertheless a suspicion of indifference. He is always evangelical. He rejects the religion he grew up with, but he rejects it religiously." A kind of theologian *manqué*, Wood confesses his atheism with a ritual regularity; as vigorously as literature mobilizes his emotions, he saves his deepest feelings for theological dispute, the one place his impeccably confident prose tends to lose its composure. As he says of Melville, he can neither believe nor do without belief. What he finally seems to want from fiction is that it recapture his lost faith without spilling a drop.

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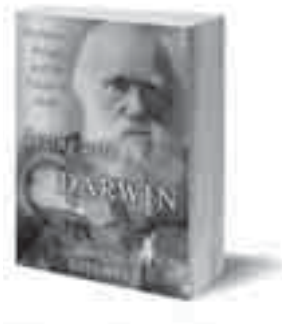

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In order to do so, it must be, as it were, "literally" true—transparently true. It must feel exactly like life, must exhibit not, as he puts it, "lifelikeness" but "*lifeness*: life on the page." Of a descriptive phrase in Henry James, Wood exclaims, "Aren't these exactly the best words in the best order?" The idea suggests the possibility of a perfect transmission from world to work, from life to "lifeness," as if the artistic medium could function like a clear pane of glass. Wood knows, of course, that realism is a set of conventions, but like a liberal Catholic who understands that Jesus wasn't really divine, he would prefer to forget it. Hence his discomfort with the artful distortion, the allegorical dislocation—the bank shot, the knight's move, the indirect approach.

Too much is sacrificed on the altar of this aesthetic theology—too much in fiction that is fine; too much, finally, that is true. Magical realism is indeed unconvincing in Rushdie and Morrison, as Wood says, but what of García Márquez, who integrates it into a seamlessly imagined world? Does it matter that Borges doesn't create realistic characters? Nabokov's characters may be "galley slaves," as the novelist boasted, but he is still able to use them as, in his words, "a kind of springboard for leaping into the highest region of serious emotion." To Roland Barthes's charge that realism is merely a collection of effects, Wood correctly replies that "realism can be an effect and still be true." But so can antirealism. Wood defends realism, justly, from accusations of naïveté, but the terms in which he does so make him susceptible to the same charge. "Almost all the great 20th-century realist novels," he says, "are full of artifice," which makes artifice sound like a kind of optional ingredient, sort of like sugar, that novelists are free to add in greater or lesser amounts. Of course, everything, in every novel, is artifice. The only distinction to be made is between artifice that is flaunted and artifice that is concealed.

Wood's unwillingness to confront the contradictions in his thinking about these matters—to distinguish between realism and reality, artifice and experiment, character and person—points to a larger problem. Wood is a daring thinker, but he is not a particularly rigorous one. His powerfully associative mind tends to run him into logical cul-de-sacs that his supreme self-assurance prevents him from noticing. He often wanders from topic to topic, always too willing to be seduced from his path by the dappled description, the blooming detail. The general question tends to make him especially approximate; reading his critique of the gaseous George Steiner, I sometimes feel like I am watching two men beat each other with balloons. As at the larger scale, so at the smaller. Wood asserts that Mann's fiction is childlike because, among other things, it contains a lot of children. He says that human free will is not necessarily important to God, since God could have made us less free. While we might grant him enough room to argue that Morrison loves her characters too indulgently and then, four pages later, that she loves them less than she loves her language, we must draw the line when he tells us that Hamsun's characters "lie both to themselves and to us" and then, later in the same paragraph, that in his work "a character can lie neither to us nor to himself."

Wood's critical authority has become so daunting, it seems, that even he is afraid to challenge it. His argumentative method rests far too heavily on hand-waving, and while he is superb at turning a phrase, the fact that something sounds good doesn't guarantee that it makes any sense. Wood never stops to ask himself what his favorite formulas actually mean: characters who feel "real to themselves," who "forget" they're in a novel and so forth. These are obviously only metaphors, but metaphors for what? What, for that matter, does "lifeness" mean? And to what extent is Wood willing to take responsibility for his assertion, near the end of *How Fiction Works*, his new treatise on novelistic technique, that we should "replace the always problematic word 'realism' with the much more problematic word 'truth'"? Is something true (or beautiful, or good) just because James Wood says so?

For so imperious a critic, Wood is surprisingly sloppy. He repeatedly writes "literature" when he means "fiction." He confuses Jane and Lydia Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, thinks the Professor in Conrad's *The Secret Agent* is a real professor and fails to see that Don Quixote and Sancho Panza know exactly how they're depicted in the first half of Cervantes's work, since someone tells them at the beginning of the second (a particularly surprising oversight, given that their resulting self-consciousness shapes the couple's behavior throughout the rest of the novel). In *How Fiction Works*, he spends two full pages burbling over the delicious mystery, in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, of Mr. Casey's having gotten his "three cramped fingers making a birthday present for Queen Victoria" (Why Queen Victoria? Whatever could the present have been?), when anyone can see that something sardonically political is intended, a suspicion confirmed by Richard Ellmann's standard biography of the author. Wood's prodigious ability to trace lines of descent across novelistic history, usually so illuminating, can become first a bookkeeper's compulsion (he'll complete his double entry whether it's relevant to the discussion or not), then an obsessive's delusion. Cormac McCarthy's Anton Chigurh is not a "reprise" of Conrad's Professor, even if one makes Wood think of the other; the only thing the two characters have in common is that they're both scary.

The looseness extends even to style. Aside from its profusion of metaphor, the most conspicuous feature of Wood's prose is his taste for the angled modifier: "royal fatalism," "fat charity," "white comment," "trapped loyalties." A book is described as "curlingly set in the present." Again, these sound good—they are essentially a kind of compressed metaphor—but what do they mean? Sometimes Wood unpacks them; sometimes he doesn't. Sometimes I can guess; sometimes I can't. At times it seems like he just throws an adjective at a noun and hopes it will stick. At others, the technique involves the displacement of a modifier from its expected syntactic position, a trick he probably picked up from Shakespeare. We're told that "Melville's faith quivered" on a "violent bevel," but since it's hard to see how a bevel could be violent, we under-

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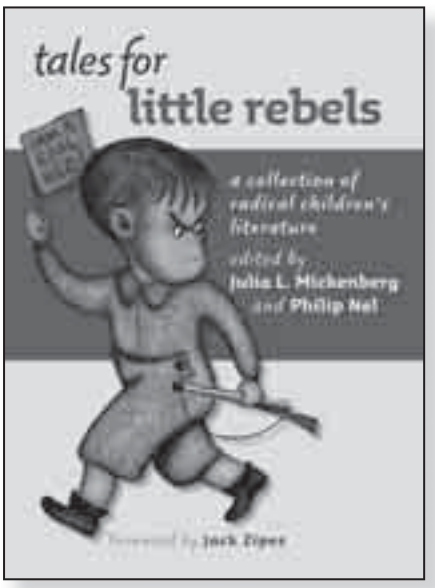
stand Wood to mean that Melville's faith quivered violently, as on a bevel. This kind of wobble is frequently to be found among his metaphors, as well. Melville fingers his torment "like a wounded rosary"; Woolf "embarrasses words into confessing their abstract pigments"; Steiner's wager on the existence of meaning "is no more than the milk of optimism, and is soaked in errors." But soaking milk is like burning fire, a confessed pigment is a verbal color improperly mixed and a wounded rosary is one incarnation too many.

These stylistic imprecisions, however, are programmatic. For Wood, metaphor naturally runs away with itself, overreaches, and will necessarily at times be unsuccessful. His angled adjectives and mixed metaphors are a form of cognitive exploration, a search party stumbling on its way to new discoveries. What's more, he claims metaphor is the proper language not only of fiction but of criticism. Because literary criticism, unlike that of music or art, shares its subject's language, it can "never offer a successful summation…one is always thinking through books, not about them." Moreover, "all criticism is itself metaphorical in movement, because it deals in likeness. It asks: what is art *like*? What does it resemble?" The language of literary criticism, Wood says, must be literary, "which is to say metaphorical."

This is a provocative idea, but it is based on several false premises and, indeed, faulty metaphors. Literary criticism may share its subject's language, but unlike music or painting, words can also be used to form concepts. Language is not only representational and emotive—that is, literary—it is also logical and analytic—that is, critical. Wood's distinction between "thinking through" and "thinking about" (both prepositions are also spatial metaphors) is another rhetorically attractive statement that turns out upon examination to be logically void. If Wood's work cannot be described as "thinking about" books—making conceptual statements about them—then neither word has any content. And the reason criticism needs to make use of the conceptual resources of language is that while it does indeed deal with what art is *like*, it also deals with what it *means*.

But beyond his theological preoccupations, Wood never shows much interest in what novels mean. His criticism shuttles between the largest scale and the smallest, the development of fictional technique over the course of novelistic history and the minute particulars of authorial style. His brilliance in describing both is unequaled, but



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he ignores just about everything that lies in between. He ignores the broad middle ground of novelistic form—narrative structures, patterns of character and image, symbols that bind far-flung moments and disparate levels of a text—and he ignores the meanings that novelists use those methods to propose. (This explains his factual mistakes and interpretive blunders; he simply isn't paying attention at a certain level.) Wood can tell us about Flaubert's narrator or Bellow's style, but he's not very curious about what those writers have to say about the world: about boredom, or grief, or death, or anything else in the wide, starred universe of human experience. He would always rather spend his time tasting the flavor of a phrase or giving the deck of his theoretical interests another shuffle.

Nor is it a very large deck. Wood doesn't develop his ideas from essay to essay so much as reiterate them, often in the same words and with the same examples, like a professor pulling out his old lectures year after year. (In *How Fiction Works*, he mutes his rhetorical pyrotechnics in an effort not to frighten off the common reader, with the predictable result that, as the title suggests, he comes off sounding even more condescending than usual.) If *The Broken Estate* is about literature and belief, his second collection, *The Irresponsible Self*, ostensibly takes up the question of "laughter and the novel." But beyond the very general notion that humor in fiction involves a historically new symbiosis of laughter and tears, comedy and sympathy, he has nothing to say about the subject, which in any case appears in the volume only intermittently. Already in the first essay, he is drawn back willy-nilly to his intellectual lodestone, the question of belief. Wood's reading may be vast, but the stock of his ideas is rather small.

It is not hard to see why. For all his interest in fiction's ability to tell the truth about the world, there is something remarkably self-enclosed about his criticism—a sense that nothing exists beyond the boundary of his consciousness, and that his consciousness contains nothing but books. In a preface to the new work, Wood assures us that he has used "only the books I actually own—the books at hand in my study" to produce the volume. The statement is truer than he knows. Wood has read all the novels and all the volumes that bear upon the novels, and he seems to think that is all one needs to do. But there is a world outside his study, and the books in his study, and one can't understand fiction without understanding that. The novel, more than other literary forms, embodies a massive engagement with the world—has massive designs upon the world—and demands a comparable engagement from its critics. Wood thinks that McCarthy got Chigurh from Conrad because he can't imagine that he got him from anywhere other than another novel. *How Fiction Works* offers us "a brief history of consciousness" from Homer to Modernism but without any suggestion that the representation of consciousness in literature might have something to do with what has happened outside literature. Wood treats the novelistic canon like one giant Keatsian urn, a self-sufficient aesthetic artifact removed from commerce with the dirty, human world.

Here we begin to glimpse the enormous gulf that lies between James Wood, the best we have to offer, and the New York critics, Wilson, Trilling, Kazin and Howe—and, let us add, lest we fetishize that quartet, which in any case begins to sound like a white-shoe law firm that's being taken over by Jews, another critic with strong claims to inclusion in that company, Elizabeth Hardwick. What made these thinkers so distinguished, what made their criticism so significant not only for American literature but also for this country's intellectual culture as a whole, was not great learning, or great thinking, or great expressive ability, or great sensitivity to literary feeling and literary form, though they exhibited all of these, but a passionate involvement with what lies beyond the literary and creates its context. Wilson, who wrote about everything during his teeming career, from politics to popular culture, socialist factions to Native American tribes, warned about "the cost of detaching books from all the other affairs of human life."

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Trilling's whole method as a critic was to set the object of his consideration within the history of what he called "the moral imagination." Kazin, whose criticism, like Hardwick's, focused on the literature of this country in particular, sought to illuminate nothing less than "the nature of our American experiences." The goal of Howe's criticism, he said, was "the recreation of a vital democratic radicalism in America." The New York critics were interested in literature because they were interested in politics, culture, the moral life and the life of society, and all as they bore on one another. They placed literature at the center of their inquiry because they recognized its ability not only to represent life but, as Matthew Arnold said, to criticize it—to ask questions about where we are and how where we are stands in relation to where we should be. They were not aesthetes; they were, in the broadest sense, intellectuals.

To turn from Wood to any one of these writers is to breathe an incomparably richer mental atmosphere. Wood's reading of the theatrical performance in *Mansfield Park*, which causes so much trouble for the characters in Austen's novel by stirring up impermissible feelings, is a crabbed conceit about the difference between theatrical and novelistic pacing. Trilling's, which revolutionized our understanding of this recalcitrant work, brings the history of nineteenth-century ideas about duty, sincerity and much else to bear on the novel's uncongenial insistence on "fixity" of identity and conduct. Wood's essay on Updike conducts a critique of the novelist's religious complacency that feels like an argument in a Cambridge common room—pedantic, persnickety and finally rather bloodless. Hardwick's, slyly sophisticated and elegantly droll, swift and easy and knowing, bespeaks a critic who has lived and moved in the world, and who has made her studies of character

Poorly Grounded Notions

And an inability to comprehend the
flow of time. We need only think of statements
by everybody. I cannot call my-
self myself. Up to this point, the dreamer
is dreaming, but now his dream
begins. Unities of recollection, separate
from one another. Thus in this present
world, there are different injuries.

I never hear them. They come
uninvited. Silver tissue. Garlands
between them. Any activity may produce
music. Aware of their existence as an
awareness of losing their sense of ex-
istence: vague, general, nameless, like
a nothing or the absolute. I am dead. I am
not alive, a music of exceeding shrillness.

May be pleasantly illustrated in the
following way. Light on his head. Felicitous,
contains some fabrication. I am
forced to shout out, trace failure to the stage
when plans are construed. I see a table
before me. I am reminded of another
table. I place table beside table. Separate
worlds. In what sense are we talking?

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from life as well as books. For the New York critics, novelists are people; for Wood, people, including novelists, are ideas. To set his pages on Bellow next to Kazin's or Howe's is to remember everything we've been missing. On the novelist's style they are no less incisive than he, but they understand it in relation to an incomparably broader range of relevancies: Jewishness, the city, the American vernacular—human relevancies, not just aesthetic ones. Nor is this a matter of greater demographic closeness. Compare Kazin on Jewish-American fiction to Wood on postwar English fiction ("English" as in England). The former is nothing less than the psychic biography of an entire community. The latter confines itself to purely aesthetic issues; what has happened in England since the end of World War II—anything that has happened in England since the war, politically, socially or culturally—simply doesn't enter into his thinking. The comprehensiveness of his omissions is staggering.

One cannot finally fault Wood for this. No one is doing what the New York critics once did. The real question is why. The first answer, it seems to me, has to do with a general loss of cultural ambition. We no longer have anyone who aspires to be the next Joyce or Proust either. The Modernist drive to remake the world has given way to a postmodern sense of enfeeblement. The very idea of heroic criticism, like that of heroic art, is, as Menand so gleefully announced, no longer credible. Related to this is the so-called "cultural turn," the abandonment of the political dimension of radical critique over the past several decades in favor of an exclusive emphasis on social meanings—the domain of cultural studies in the academy and "cultural criticism" in the media. Gone is any sense that politics and culture are connected, or that their criticism should be connected—the real reason we no longer have any public intellectuals, whose activity is predicated on precisely that belief. It was a belief indebted, to a large extent, to Marxism. The struggle to come to terms with Marxism was central to the New York critics' intellectual formation. It is no accident that the few older writers who still practice a broad-gauge criticism, most notably Terry Eagleton, Clive James and Christopher Hitchens, have all had extensive business with that ideology, or that its disappearance has coincided with a diminishment of critical possibility. Wood's distaste for the postmodern and admirable refusal of its easy cynicisms notwithstanding, his narrow aestheticism marks him unmistakably as a product of his time.

I don't know how we're going to get back to the kind of criticism the New York critics wrote, or the kind of intellectual life that criticism made possible. Their emergence was the result of a historical juncture that will probably never recur. But I do know that we won't get back to it by taking Wood as our critical template. Ozick's thicket of Woods would be a dwarf forest. We are immensely fortunate to have him—his talent, his erudition, his judgment—but if American criticism were to follow his lead, it would end up only in a desert. ■

Letters

(continued from page 2)

Campaign" to one of your editorials. It was staggering. Is it *really* from the Obama campaign? Or was it written by someone in the McCain camp, or a writer at the *Onion*? Has the Obama campaign really become such a prisoner of its own rhetoric that it thinks all thoughtful opposition (or support) can be smothered into nonbeing by a wash of sanctimony? If this letter is genuine I have to confess to a growing uneasiness about our new world of "change."

Fred Kolo

Brooklyn, N.Y.

As an avid *Nation* subscriber who reads each issue cover to cover, I have taken to glancing at Alexander Cockburn's column only occasionally. I read it as I do William Kristol's in the *New York Times*, to get a view of an alternate reality unrelated to any I experience, and to read the word "liberal" used so derisively one would think that liberals alone have caused all the world's troubles. But even marking on the curve I reserve only for Cockburn, his "Against Obama" is stunning. Amid the usual bashings, he asks whether there is a single reason to vote *for* Obama, as opposed to voting *against* McCain.

Perhaps he should read *The Nation*. Herman Schwartz recently wrote about the Supreme Court and how Obama's potential appointments would stop the slide, and perhaps change the tide, on everything from choice, equal pay for women, access to the courts, disability rights, civil rights and civil liberties. Katha Pollitt can educate Cockburn about gender equality, and Patricia Williams about an Obama presidency and race. Ari Melber, who writes about politics and the netroots, can bring him into the twenty-first century.

Is Obama perfect? Of course not, and *The Nation* has been valuable in pointing out deficiencies in his healthcare plan and economic policies. But Barack Obama is the closest we will come to a progressive, charismatic, principled politician. And yes, for the first time in nearly fifty years I looked forward to voting *for* a candidate rather than *against* one.

Daniel Greenberg

Late Night With *The Nation*

Pearland, Tex.

Waking up at 2:45 am and finding the "To the Polls" [Nov. 10] issue of *The Nation* on my kitchen counter, I thought, I'm tired and will just leaf through it. But that didn't happen. I started with the Crossword, had no success, and went to the Classifieds—interesting ads. I continued paging from back to front, reading each article and thinking I'd get back to bed. But I was forced to read the entire issue, as each article was more compelling than the last.

I subscribe to *The Nation* for my husband, a 24/7 news zealot. He loves it and nearly has a breakdown if he thinks I tossed it out. Fortunately for him I enjoy *The Nation* as much as he does.

Thank you for giving me a better understanding of ACORN. I only knew that ACORN worked to register voters. I researched and found that it was formed primarily to get better housing and wages for the poor and community development investment from banks and governments, and it works for better schools. I hope the media, which have accused ACORN of voter fraud, will also describe the 1,850 or so homes that were restored by it for Katrina victims.

Finally, "Noted" ends with the thought that just getting Barack Obama into the White House will not fix our problems—exactly what I've been trying to tell people. We need to stay in touch with our government. We must put our members of Congress on notice that if they don't perform as we expect, they will not be re-elected.

Catherine Nochella

Red State Blues (for Granddaddy)

Chattanooga, Tenn.

I'm a white man and I've had all I can stand of General George and the Republican Plan. Two times I've been wrong in the past eight years, so as I cast my vote I did so with fear. Barack, I pray you the man *that will* point the way. Granddaddy, I hope you didn't roll over in yo grave!

Dan Lamons, *da BluesHonky*

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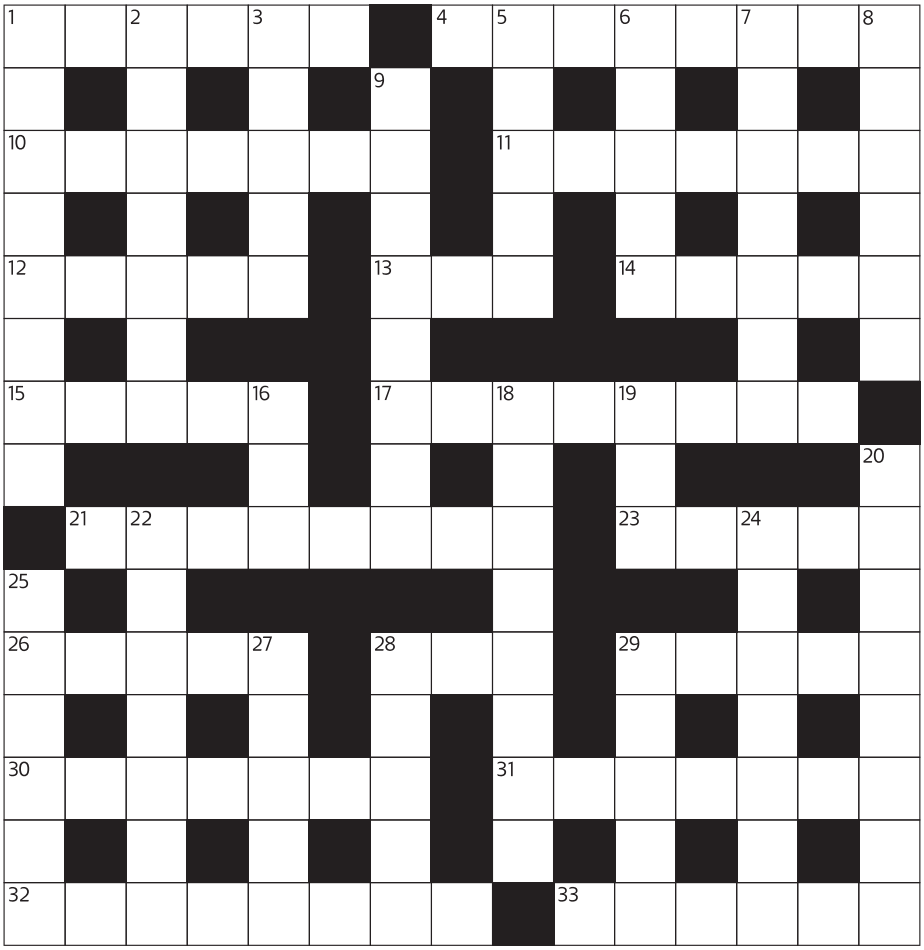

ACROSS

1 Possibly senile, but that's one way to store things. (6)

4 Well, the erudite should be! (8)

10 Perhaps delicate, if a final point is not made—a strong point! (7)

11 Dance with nothing on? It could be a trial type. (7)

12,13 and **14** This might be all you get for your trouble! (5,3,5)

15 and **17** Early settler who goes a long distance to put up with his sort. (5,8)

21 Laugh out loud on Long Island shortly with Dad—what a sucker! (8)

23 Boats that disprove the fact that no man can serve two masters. (5)

26 Ditch such defenses! It sounds like they have a real funny output! (2-3)

28 In favor of the nonamateurish type? (3)

29 Where the Brit hangs out for a call that can't be a long distance. (5)

30 Sire is distressed about everything that could be used to raise enthusiasm. (7)

31 What the one of 29 has at 4 o'clock, with really unruly people showing what they rode at one time. (7)

32 and **33** Where stars show a certain amount of rank. (8,6)

DOWN

1 Cries about demands made by the former spouse? (8)

2 One might carry things in what might be described as an old pitcher. (7)

3 Certainly not good deals made the way one puts on cargo. (5)

5 Given a mathematical increase, like certain sugar servings might be. (5)

6 The lowest deck is right in the pool, sort of. (5)

7 Behold! I put it in one's definition of those crazy people! (7)

8 One might call for it at breakfast, and his makeup will prove it! (6)

9 What Mrs. Mop does, and makes a lot of money? (6,2)

16 My gal of song. (3)

18 Come up to a very quiet fish? (8)

19 Twenty-four hours in the life of Clarence spent with Daddy? (3)

20 Is nothing least disturbed by what the "spreadable" disease does to you? (8)

22 To bring it up with a greeting is just like a Shakespearean character! (7)

24 Sort of wait around his possibilities in Kansas. (7)

25 Listen to what's in the ship! They could be dangerous! (6)

27 Quiet, yet! (5)

28 A wrong step around it could be sticky! (5)

29 The tiniest bit could be stale! (5)

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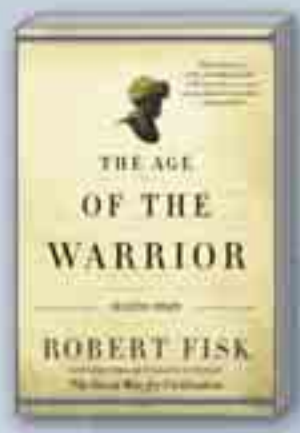

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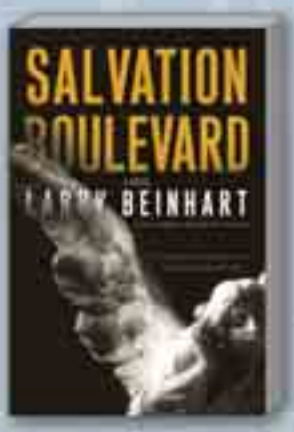

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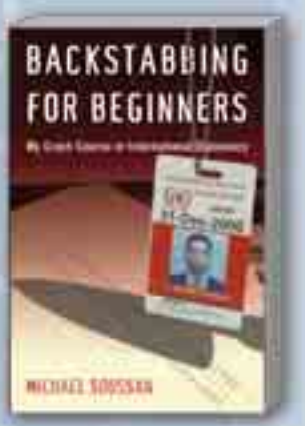

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